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LETTERS FROM MRS. CHENOWITH  
AND OTHER STORIES

By

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Bachelor of Arts in English, Augustana College  
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## LETTERS FROM MRS. CHENOWITH

Mrs. Ellen Chenowith was a name well known to my family. The woman who bore it wrote frequent letters to my mother, and always before Christmas sent a card with a five dollar bill each for my sister and me. She was the only person to whom we were exempt from mailing thank you notes; Mom said she wasn't the kind of woman who liked to be acknowledged for performing small kindnesses.

Every weekday afternoon, Mom waited in the kitchen for the postman, Mr. Hirsh. He wore a sleigh bell attached to his bootlace to warn the neighborhood dogs of his approach. At church on Sundays I expected to hear him jingling up the aisle, but he moved silently, like a ghost of himself, and kept his head bowed during the sermon. He was often the only person outside our family Mom saw during the week since she spent her days fussing with Joanie and me and with the house and the meals and with our father, whose clothes she said she had to wash twice to get the stink of dairy out. He worked for Grossman's creamery, delivering milk and soft foil-wrapped packets of cream cheese to the residents of Geneseo and to the outlying corn farms in Henry County. I remember entering his warm bedroom and seeing from the faint light through the drapes his mouth open so that he appeared ready to devour one of the little yellow flowers on the fabric of the pillowcase. His breath smelled stale from the cigarettes he smoked in the corner of the yard and deposited in the cement bird bath. Whenever Mom went to hang the laundry on the frozen line, she found a collage of the dirty cigarette butts poking through the snow and this made her angrier than anything. She accused him of poisoning the nuthatches who nested in our rain gutter – though we'd never found a dead one - and

then made a show of crushing his current pack into the trash, raining tobacco over the linoleum like confetti.

“Is it pork chops?” he mumbled. He stretched his arms and fingers so his knuckles brushed the wooden toes of Jesus on his cross. He was what he called an armchair Catholic and so didn’t have to go to the Lutheran services which Mom made me attend with her every week. Instead he spent Sundays on the sofa with his bare feet propped on the coffee table and read western paperbacks with romantic titles like *Buckeyes in the Sand* and *Montana Rescue*. The line drawings inside featured cowboys chasing bandits who carried drooping bags printed with dollar signs, or else roping wild stallions who scowled at the reader with their narrow, sinister eyes. The cowboys never seemed to rest, as my father did; Mom and Joanie and I usually returned to find him snoring with a book tented over his thigh.

“Pickled cow tongues,” I said. I was already giggling before his hands seized my vulnerable cusp of armpit, and lifted me onto the mattress, even though by that time I was nine and the tallest in my class. He searched for my feet in the tangle of blankets and yanked off my socks, digging between my toes until I wailed through my laughter and clutched my ribs, afraid my lungs would burst with joy.

“Joanie’s at Betty Rourke’s for supper again,” Mom announced from the doorway. This was her way of quieting us without directly asking; she could not tolerate loud noises or running in the house; she disliked the television and forbade my father from watching *The Three Stooges*, lest Joanie and I gather ideas for violent pranks. She plucked at the strings of her sunflower-patterned apron, letting her shoulders droop.

“I told her why not take the sleeping bag, she’s so keen lately on spending her time elsewhere,” she said. “Anyway Dale, I thought maybe the rest of my family might enjoy sharing a meal with me.”

“Thirteen,” Dad crooned. He stood, and after massaging his knees, moved toward her. “Think of when you were that young, chasing boys around Joplin.”

I smiled at the idea of Mom hurrying along the sweltering Missouri sidewalk behind a group of men, but really all I could imagine was a shorter version of her hunched over a math textbook, shy behind horn-rimmed glasses. She had gotten good grades and in high school, an essay she’d written about a tornado she’d seen through the window of her childhood bedroom had won an award and been published in the *Joplin Tribune*. *I sat moored to my bed, watching the sky yellow and blacken, but still I could not move* was the first sentence; I had found the laminated copy stuck between pages of an empty photo album marked *Marie: Early years* and read the line over until I memorized it, impressed that my own mother had written something so dramatic.

“Mrs. Chenowith wrote today,” Mom said. She dabbed the corners of her eyes on Dad’s nightshirt.

“Ah, see?” he replied. “Your friend.” He put his arms around her and she blinked at me over his shoulder. I didn’t know why she worried so much about people liking her, but I thought maybe her quietness was mistaken for arrogance. She wasn’t like other mothers in town, who met for weekly lunches and wore pearls and red lipstick and exchanged gossip with their lips practically touching each other’s ears. After church, she didn’t allow us to linger at the donut table - which would have made an opportunity for her to socialize - because she thought other women were snooty. She’d told me so once

after I said June York's mother wore perfume that smelled like orange juice and that she was the prettiest lady in Geneseo.

After the supper dishes had been cleared into the sink, Dad fetched his boots and sat at the table with his socked feet on the rug. I watched him to see if he was going out to the yard to smoke, but he didn't take out the pack from his jacket pocket and I knew he was thinking about seeing his friends.

"But won't you hear the letter, Dad?" I said. I wanted him to stay, or to take me along to Glenn's, where a Zow-Wee pinball machine that only cost a nickel for three plays stood in the corner and where the men Dad knew bought me sodas because they liked him so much. Mom called these men the members of the Dale Karlsson fan club, she called them loudmouths.

"It's Verne's birthday on Monday," Dad said, lacing his boots. "Jesus, Marie, now that's a look."

Mrs. Chenowith appeared to me later on the ceiling of the bedroom I shared with Joanie as a tiny woman who wore stiff brown dresses with lace collars and hems and addressed everyone as *dear*. I don't know what she really looked or acted like, but because a twelve year age gap existed between her and Mom, and because she despised the idea of owning a telephone, I gave her attributes I associated with old women. She was probably only about fifty-five, but I pinned a bird-shaped broach with a glittering sapphire eye in the lapel of her dress and hunched her shoulders and permed her wispy white hair. I placed a stack of *Knitting World* magazines on a glass-topped coffee table beside a porcelain shepherd boy with his nose chipped off. Mom said she hadn't seen Mrs. Chenowith since their days together at Kroeger's in Joplin, where as a high school

student Mom had bagged the groceries Mrs. Chenowith rang into the cash register. Mrs. Chenowith had been in her early thirties then, and married, but despite their age difference, they had talked of one day retiring from family life and moving to the east coast. This was before Mom moved up to Iowa for college, though she dropped out after just one semester at St. Ambrose University to marry Dad. Mrs. Chenowith hadn't been able to attend the wedding because she'd been in the hospital, giving birth to her daughter, Matilda. She hadn't even mailed a card – I knew because I'd spent afternoons rifling through the thick stack of correspondence Mom kept in a shoebox in her sewing closet. No, the earliest letters were dated just after Joanie was born and Mrs. Chenowith had relocated to northeastern Maine, where she and her husband Jeffery bought an old farmhouse and renovated it into a bed and breakfast. The Shoals, the place was called. Mom said she could only dream of making such a drastic move, much less attempt to pry Dad away from the creamery, where his own father had worked until he died. Milk was in his blood, he liked to say, and I imagined pink liquids surging through him.

“I miss my children, Marie,” my mother read that evening, while I folded my hands across my stomach and listened. “It's not their growing older I mind, but their growing apart. They were once such friends, Matilda and Reece, but I think they rarely even call each other anymore. I hope you can encourage your girls to remain close. Winter has settled and I am alone. Even the gulls have flown south.”

She continued to describe the wild waves and the long field grass that hunched in the wind like a crowd of beggar women. Having spent my life in the small farming town of Geneseo, Illinois, surrounded by corn and sky and trees planted by Norwegian



homesteaders, Maine seemed as distant and magical as an island in a fairy tale, and the states that separated us appeared as vast as a black forest netted with poisonous vines.

I saw myself there with Mrs. Chenowith, sharing hot cocoa under the painting of the egg on a white countertop. “Took me weeks and weeks,” she liked to tell her lodgers. This was a joke, my mother had explained. I imagined the English Setter Bo lying in the shadow of the dining table, kicking his legs in dreams.

“Why don’t Reece and Matilda live with her any more?” I interrupted. “Why don’t they talk to each other?”

Her eyes caught the light; I knew she was about to cry. “They’ve forgotten what’s important, but she waits for them to realize. She wants to be there for them when they come back.”

I did not tell her I understood how Mrs. Chenowith felt, that I was waiting for Joanie to realize the terrible way she’d been acting lately so we could go back to being sisters again. I believed if I kept quiet, lingering at the backdrop of her days, she would realize she preferred me to her school friends, and that her selfishness had ruined my birthday.

Mrs. Chenowith had sent me a stuffed dog I named Bo, after her English Setter. “It’s just like the one at Toy Farm!” I exclaimed, kissing its fabric petal of a tongue, its paws separated by black thread. I wore a cardboard crown wrapped in tinfoil.

“A lucky girl,” my father observed, slicing the lemon birthday cake Mom had baked and decorated with a candles shaped into a 9. On the sideboard lay the new tartan jumper they had gotten me for school and a drawing set with colored pencils. Joanie had

filled a wicker basket I remembered seeing in Mom's craft bin with cellophane-wrapped chocolates from the grocery store. She said she hadn't had time to make a card.

"Joanie, can he ride Stardust?" I asked. The old Joanie would've found her stuffed pony with the bendable legs and let me gallop him over the hills of the sofa.

"I have homework."

"Joan Elizabeth, you should have thought of that when you were out all afternoon with Betty Rourke," Mom said.

"I was buying Manda's present, thank you. And that's three dollars out of my allowance."

Dad passed the plates and cleared his throat. My piece of cake had two messy holes where candles had stood. "Let's discuss this later."

"Oh you always let her off the hook, Dale," Mom said. She stabbed her fork into the frosting. "She'll realize someday all the time she missed out on with her family."

"What about Mrs. Chenowith?" Joanie asked. "You talk about her constantly and she's not family."

"She is eight hundred miles away. I have not seen her in over twenty years because I've been trying to raise you girls, ungrateful as you are."

"Oh so sad," Joanie sang with a mocking tone that caused us to stop chewing and blink at her as if she had flicked water into our eyes. The cake began to taste sour and I wondered if Mom had used too much lemon juice.

When I went up to our room later, I found a clothesline strung from the bookshelf to Joanie's dresser, and a blue cotton sheet hung over the line. Joanie's silhouette paced

behind the fabric, removing the clip earrings she'd recently started wearing, brushing her hair, undressing.

When we came home from school the next afternoon, Joanie reached the upstairs landing and saw what Mom had done. She easily could have retrieved the sheet from the linen closet and the clothesline from where it lay coiled at the bottom of the bathroom trash can, but instead she flung her *America: Visions of our Forefathers* textbook at the wall and yelled as loudly as I had ever heard her yell while she turned her rage on the neat little mounds of underclothes on top of our dresser.

"Mom folded those," I said quietly, picking up my favorite panties with the cloth daisies around the waistband. I didn't understand why the sight of our wool socks and tights with the mended knees should upset her so.

"I put it there for a reason," she shouted, emphasizing each word. Her cheeks were slick and the veins in her neck stuck out and turned red like when you hold your wrist and trap all the blood in your hand. She stomped around, mingling our socks on the carpet.

"Your father is trying to sleep." Mom crossed the room toward Joanie in two quick strides and, burying my face against the belly of my little stuffed dog, I waited for the smack. But when I blinked between my fingers, I saw Joanie lying on her bed with her knees tented and her head in Mom's lap. I sat up.

"What's that?" I asked. Something wrapped in foil lay on her stomach, moving up and down along with the jagged motions of her breathing.

"See, she's always looking at me," Joanie insisted quietly, crossing her arms as if to conceal the outline of the padded bra she'd started wearing this year.

“She admires you, Joanie.” Mom said.

“She copies everything I do.”

They spoke as if I wasn’t there while Mom moved her fingers through the tangles in Joanie’s curls. I got up and went to them. “Is that cream cheese?”

“The cold will make her stomach feel better.”

“It’s not fair.” Joanie pouted. “You have your space away from Dad, why can’t I put the sheet up?” It was true: the windowless room Mom called her sewing closet was at the end of the upstairs hall. She spent lots of time looking through craft books loaned from the library and arranging fabric scraps on the little workman’s table Dad had built for her. In shoeboxes lining the wall were her letters from Mrs. Chenowith and the construction paper cards Joanie and I had made her over the years. Over her desk hung a watercolor of a man standing on the pages of a floating book, which was a scene Mom said was supposed to represent the feeling of getting carried away by a good story. Though she scoffed when Dad read his cowboy stories aloud after dinner. *Will Henry reach the burning city in time, or is it too late for the citizens of Livingston?* He dangled the question before me until I pounded my feet on the linoleum, demanding to know the conclusion. “That’s melodrama on paper, right there,” Mom usually retorted. “The good guy will win, Mandy. All these stories end the same.”

A metal lamp sat at the corner of the desk beside the only valuable object my grandmother had brought to America: a blue rosemaling birdhouse in which she had stuffed her wedding ring wrapped in cotton, fearing someone on the boat from Norway would try to steal it. An embroidery sampler lay beside the birdhouse, and represented a girl with her face shadowed by a yellow bonnet. Letters rained over her onto the

unfinished flower bed, spelling *Love Grows Where*. Mom had not gotten around to completing the word *Planted* and so the phrase seemed now a question the girl contemplated.

“It’s just not a good idea, Joan,” Mom said that day after my ninth birthday. “Someday you’ll realize she’s the best friend you’ve got.”

Joanie shoved the slushy bag of peas off her stomach. “I have plenty of friends.”

She did, and that was what worried me. Over the course of the next few months, I listened to Joanie murmuring into the telephone late at night, and I hung around the yard of the junior high, hoping she would choose to walk home with me instead of to Betty’s house or to the double feature. In bed I lay awake, praying for someone to intervene, to unite us again. I imagined our hearts were attached by invisible thread stretching across an ocean of carpet. Everyday, it seemed, I felt the thread go taut as Joanie floated further away, like the man on the book caught up in his story. Soon I feared the spool would run out, that pile of thread would become too heavy, and would sink.

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On a Friday night before Christmas, Mom made pork sausage and hash browns and Dad woke early to eat with us. Midway through the meal, the phone rang and Dad went out to the hall and spoke for a long time to one of his friends. “It’s okay, Jerry,” he kept saying, and laughing after he said it. After we had finished, Mom stood to scrape the contents of his plate into the trash. Crossing back to her place, she smoothed Joanie’s hair and brushed it back from her shoulders.

“Mom!” Joanie said, yanking her head forward. “What are you doing? I’m going to Betty’s later.”

“Can’t I even touch my own daughter?” Mom exclaimed. “Tell me, Joanie. Tell me why I’m no longer good enough for you. You are just like your father. You both think these people, these so called friends – these Betty Rourke’s and Jerry Caldwell’s will matter when it’s all said and done. You think your family is something to get away from, but someday, Joanie.” She trailed off, shaking her head. Her shoulders were raised slightly as if an invisible string pulled them toward the ceiling. She moved her bleary gaze up to the light fixture, where dead bugs had clustered at the base of the globe, and then let it fall on Dad. He stood with his shoulder against the doorframe, watching with an amused smile on his face and rattling his flip-top lighter between his fingers as if it was a piece of tape he was trying to flick away. He didn’t seem upset about his food being in the trash.

“Relax, Marie,” he said, laughing. “God, you just need to listen to yourself. The queen of melodrama.”

“Oh yes, very funny, and I suppose you plan to spend your evening with Jerry and the rest of your fan club down at Glenn’s. Running off as usual.” She grabbed Joanie’s plate and stood there with it, watching him. I wondered if she would throw it. “Well, that’s quite a look, Dale. I hope your children see how little respect you have for your wife. What a nice example. You know, Ellen’s family didn’t run out on her. Her husband spent every night at home, helping with the dishes and asking about her day and her daughter didn’t leave home until she got married.”

“Booo-ring,” Joanie sang, and despite myself, I giggled. She smiled slyly at me and then reached across the table for my stuffed dog, who was eating strands of hash browns from my lap. “Manda, want to come to Betty’s with me? We can do your hair up in hot rollers. You can even call June York if you like.”

My heart flopped against my ribs; I felt too happy to realize I was being used. I glanced from Joanie to Mom, who had closed her eyes. She clutched the soft back of Joanie’s chair and raised the back of her other hand to her lips.

“Ah, Lord,” she murmured, but before the sight of her tears could guilt me into staying, I was out the back door behind Joanie, crossing the icy sidewalk Dad had forgotten to salt.

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“Go out without a coat and what do you expect.” It was Sunday morning, and I lay under the bedcovers as Mom rubbed cold menthol cream on my chest and neck. Her hand moved in rough circles over my collarbone and she looked at a place above my forehead, maybe at the ends of my hair, which were still curly from Betty’s hot rollers. She wore her church clothes and had her own hair pinned up in a way I liked because it showed off her cheekbones.

“Joanie says she’s given up religion now. *What next?* I ask her.” She sighed. “I told her it won’t hurt her to come with her poor old mother to church regardless of what she believes in, do you think?”

I blinked at her, taking in the amber glow of morning light on the little hairs that bordered her jaw. “Ah, anyway. Your father could probably be persuaded to make hot chocolate if we’re still not back when you wake up.” Holding her sticky fingers away from our bodies, she bent to kiss my ear.

I woke to see the sun highlighting the objects in my room, and felt warm inside, thinking of my father downstairs reading, and of Mom and Joanie in their woolen tights and dresses singing “Rock of Ages” while the same light fell on them through stained glass. I didn’t feel like sleeping any more. My stomach growled. Feverishly, I got up and went into the hall, mesmerized by the glare on the doorknobs. My nightgown clung to the menthol cream on my chest. It was strange being in the house without Mom there, it felt empty; I missed her. The door to her sewing closet was open, and I snuck in to see if she’d been working on the sampler of the girl in the bonnet. She hadn’t. Dust had gathered between the stitches, fertilizing the garden with bits of gray. Protruding from the top drawer of her desk was a corner of lilac-colored paper. I pulled the sheet out, and realized the date at the top of the page was tomorrow’s; I knew this because I had been counting the days until Christmas.

“Losing a daughter,” the handwriting proclaimed, “may be the most difficult event a mother must endure. I never believed she would leave before me, I prayed it wouldn’t be so. But when they’re gone, Marie, they truly are gone. No one prepares you for the loneliness of motherhood.” A thick dot spread from tail of the D in motherhood, where Mom had held the tip too long. At the bottom of the paper was the same looping signature I’d observed for years on the Christmas cards that Mom placed on the kitchen table for us to admire: *Ellen Chenowith*.



A shock - like the tiny buzz of electricity that sparks between socks and carpeting – inverted my pores, and I nearly glanced behind me to see if Mom stood in the sunny hallway, her eyes wild as the untamable stallion in *Montana Rescue*. It is strange and bit frightening, that first moment of realizing our parents are more complex than we like to believe. It was like the night some months before when Dad had angled the stove away from the wall to sweep out a mouse that had died there. Having eaten so many meals while gazing at that sparkling surface, I couldn't believe the greasy metal and ugly, snaking cords belonged to the same appliance. I hurried back to bed, bewildered and silently sobbing, and let my thoughts linger in Mom's little room. The porcelain egg in a wooden cup seemed to leap out at me from the shelf where it poised against the white wall. On the floor crouched an old Kroeger's bag full of fabric samples. So much became obvious: Mom's obsessive waiting for Mr. Hirsh – not so she could hoard the mail, but so she could pretend to receive what was not there, and the pointlessness of thank you notes and the absence of envelopes with return addresses. The little stuffed dog I had pleaded for, that Dad had not been willing to buy.

In my memories of the letters, I sensed Mom's fear and need to keep her family intact by instructing us through her fictional character, and all the while distracting us with descriptions of a life she may have dreamed of. How desperately she had tried – still tried – to save herself from a life of loneliness! I felt so sorry for her, and for myself to have discovered the truth; in an instant, I had lost part of my childhood. Mrs. Chenoweth, whose problems had paralleled Mom's, faded along with her fairy tale island; all that remained was my existence in Geneseo and my sadness, because I knew that despite the

memory of her hands in my hair at Betty's, Joanie would soon be lost to me. Adulthood beckoned, and she would go.

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"That poor woman." Mom sat at the kitchen table on Monday afternoon, polishing the wooden apples she kept in a bowl as the centerpiece. Dad stood before the stove, frying bacon for sandwiches. Mom wore a pair of his overalls that drooped over her feet like clown pants. The letter lay on the linoleum; she'd set the scene well. "Dead, can you believe it?" She wiped the corners of her eyes on the back of her wrist.

I bit my lip, trying not to laugh. I had gotten over feeling sorry for her; she had tricked me, had lied as she had so many times taught me not to.

"Who Ma?" Joanie hung her satchel over a chair back and lifted her foot to examine a tear in the toe of her tights. I had decided to tell Joanie about Mrs. Chenoweth tomorrow morning, when we were alone walking to school.

"To lose one of you girls," Mom said. "I can't even imagine. We should thank God for each other."

"Hallelujah," I murmured.

"What was that smart little remark?"

"Didn't she invite you to the funeral?"

Mom squinted at me. "Now you know she doesn't have a telephone. They buried the poor girl last week."

"Who died?" Joanie repeated.

“Matilda,” Dad said over the sizzle of grease. “Mrs. Chenowith’s daughter.”

Mom absently swiped over the table with her dust cloth and bent to retrieve the tear-smudged letter, holding it out to Joanie. “You girls don’t have to run off tonight, do you? I need someone with me.” What an actress Mom was! But I sensed Joanie was acting too; her eyes skimmed indifferently over words meant remind her of the fragility of life and the importance of loving one’s siblings, and all the while the invisible thread between our hearts pulsed with her eagerness to escape. I wondered how anyone – how both of them – could behave so selfishly. And Dad too, who even while consoling Mom was probably anxious for tomorrow night when he would hurry up the sidewalk to Glenn’s, away from us. I never believed I’d prefer anyone to my family, but right then I wanted to see my friend June York whose mother smelled like orange juice and who said “gosh” like it was a swear word. But I could never tell a girl like June about the letters because only Joanie and I, as sisters, had sensed the mythical and distant presence of Mrs. Chenowith. As much as I wanted to tell Joanie then, I realized I have to wait until after our mother and father have died, when to reveal the lie will not snap the thread between us, but bind us as keepers of a family secret.

In the morning I walked just behind her as far as the grain elevator before we wordlessly parted, me to the elementary school and her to the junior high. My boots crunched snow already packed against the pavement by the soles of my classmates and wind rushed up my sleeves. Red and green paper chains were woven between the slats of the fence. I saw June York waiting near the swings, but I pretended my bootlace had come untied and then stood and turned to watch Joanie.

She had stopped to untie her hood and unzip her jacket beside the flagpole. Her hair caught the wind and her skirt flared. I imagined her face as if I stood behind the glass window in the door she walked toward, the smile hiding chattering teeth, her cheeks flushed and eyes blinking against the chill damp air. I felt sad then, because I could not understand why she felt the need to impress people she saw everyday and why the simple fact of their presence should influence her to act so drastically. But I sensed this was the way our lives were headed, and that soon we would understand even less about each other. Joanie approached the door and, perhaps seeing my reflection before her, turned and with an impatient wave shooed me back toward the elementary school, where the girls I called friends were waiting.

## THE DUST THAT CONSUMES US

Arlene called Thursday morning, as expected. “You sneak,” she scolded. “Not allowing so much as a hint.” I was relieved to hear none of her usual stubbornness, but instead a childish glee bubbling over the line.

“Well, seriously,” I said, “don’t you feel better? How you cut a path through all that junk – no, that’s an inappropriate word – that clutter, I should say, is beyond me.” Arlene didn’t respond and in the background I heard the television going, her boisterous and familiar houseguest.

“So, tell me,” I urged, “When’s your debut?”

“Oh Karen, it’s not such a big deal.” Now the irritation. “The house is clean and that’s all there is to it. My privacy was invaded and frankly, I’m embarrassed to think thousands might be watching this thing, but at least the attic’s tidy, no?”

“Don’t be extreme,” I said, though I knew that for her to have allowed so many strangers into rooms she’d shared for the past forty-some years with her husband must have been a remarkable chore.

“It wasn’t the most painful of experiences,” she admitted, “and I put on Dad’s old roller skates in the upstairs hall, just for a laugh.”

We were raised; Arlene, Lora and I, in the house in Massena, New York that my mother had inherited from my grandfather, and he from his father. This great-grandfather had called it the “great house,” a name that tumbled down the list of his descendents and stuck.

An artist of some renown, my Grandpa Alfie (his full name was Alfred Scott Harbinger) painted oils of stormy New England seascapes. His canvases were wild with splotches of dull grays and blues in which the boundary between cloud and water dissolved where there should have been horizon. They were actually quite boring to look at, and so he developed the trick of detailing to his customers squalls he'd braved for the sake of these paintings. "This one," he would boast, "got sucked right out to sea in the midst of a nor'easter, but damned if it didn't float right back to me on the morning tide, good as new." And, "Lighting struck every piece a driftwood on that beach, but skipped right over me when it saw what beautifulness I was making." People bought up such preserved fabrications, awed that one man had held such creative sway over nature.

It was true, though, that he set up his easel on the rocks during the worst weather. To protect the canvas, he improvised a heavy plastic cape resembling an old-fashioned photographer's hood. There was an eyehole, though which he peered at the angry foam, and strings at the corners he fastened around his ankles and the back legs of the easel. For light, he attached a pocket flashlight to the edge of the canvas with a small vise. In many of his landscapes, an eerie moon lingers in the upper right-hand corner of sky, a phenomenon his patrons deemed as his "gothic impulse", though these were simply the washed-out spaces under the lamp's beam that he'd forgotten to paint.

Though the great house was tucked far up on the bootlaces of New York, Grandpa ventured by train and then charter bus to a place just north of Portland, Maine, where he owned a summer cottage. Here, he modeled pirate ships after the fishing boats that bobbed in the surf, perhaps imagining himself further from home than he already was. He grew a beard and ate his dinners at a seafood restaurant in the city. With my grandmother

overlooking the housekeeping staff in Massena, he remained on the coast from August to November, leaving only when the relentless autumn chill prickled his bones and reminded him of the fireplace in the great house.

When my mother, an only child, took over the property, she had already married my father and given birth to Lora. My grandmother had died that year and Grandpa Alfie moved back to the cottage near Portland, refusing to live among ghosts so recently born. Unlike his style of household operations, Mother stubbornly refused the assistance of a cleaning staff, but also hated taking on such chores alone. Her time was devoted to the raising of Arlene and me, born just three years apart. Father traveled for work and returned Friday nights for the weekends. Usually he preferred the lazy comfort of family life, but sometimes, he'd get it in his head that he wanted to host a Saturday night get-together, to do things up nice. These announcements sent Mother into a flurry of scouring and scrubbing late into the night, while he slept. She listened to the portable radio, sometimes turning it loud so we felt her frustration through the static. But I liked the clear winter nights, when the transmitter picked up Canadian hockey matches from which the chill of the ice and the excitement of the crowds crackled across the air waves.

In the morning, we weren't allowed to tread upon the sparkling hardwood. Mother deemed the rugs islands and the floor a great lava pit. While we played, great-grandmother's antique candlesticks were brought out for the table, to show that finery dated back through many generations. Grandpa's paintings were dusted, light bulbs replaced, flowered garlands strung through the banisters.

Mother took the afternoon to bathe, perfume and paint herself, processes we were sometimes allowed to observe from our perch on her vanity bench. Father and Mother

practiced dances beside the phonograph, taking breaks to sip from the wine they had already broken into and to laugh at Arlene, who twirled until she grew dizzy and plopped on the rug. But when the door chime sounded, their faces resumed adult seriousness. The wine glasses were stashed into the cupboards and we were whisked to the nursery. Placed under care of the impressionable Mrs. Browning, a dairy farmer's wife, we demanded she sing nursery rhymes until we were able to sleep. We loved her timid voice, because it lacked the confidence of Mother's, and was so soft we could barely discern its pattern from the melody of the grandfather clock in the downstairs hall, or the wind.

The show was broadcast Wednesday afternoons on public television stations in the eastern states: Maine and Maryland, upstate New York, the wealthy suburbs of New Jersey, Rhode Island and Connecticut. A popular series with the older generation (which, unfortunately, I must include myself as part of), episodes documented unsuspecting homeowners and retirees surprised by a camera crew amidst their dirty clothes, neglected antiques and stashed-away relics. Relatives and friends phoned the station, nominating family members or acquaintances for the free house cleaning and tips to maintain a clutter-free life.

*The Dust that Consumes Us* rivaled titles of daytime soap operas in tackiness, but also provided Lance O'Reilly, the host, opportunities to swoon his tagline: "We must clear this dust that consumes us." O'Reilly was hailed as a cleaning "expert" from Ireland, and also as some kind of spiritual guide with abilities to will proper home management habits into the brains of even the most slovenly owners. He was entertaining and unpredictable, once attempting to hypnotize a willing participant with a bottle of



rotten milk, and in another instance donning fireplace pokers as stilts. His crew descended on each property with their mops and dust cloths, diligently organizing and discarding indicated possessions. Throughout the process, Lance commented on valuable knickknacks or unusual family heirlooms and also rearranged furniture to create a better “harmony” between the walls.

I hesitated before contacting the network; unsure how Arlene would respond to Lance’s quirky behavior or a crew of cameramen raiding her refrigerator, but the accumulation of so much filth in the great house was inspiration enough to remind me that as her sister, I must help her be rid of it.

When Arlene’s episode aired in August, I was glad to see her in a nice floral-print housedress and also with a touch of makeup around her eyes. Her hair and eyebrows had been recently dyed to conceal the dull gray. This was a good start, I thought, for when visiting last May, she had gone days without showering, wearing only her robe and a pair of Bennie’s wool socks slouched around her ankles. She’d shuffled through the rooms, kicking objects from her path. A potted fern had been up-ended, the soil from which was scattered over the living room rug like confetti from a funeral.

Even at seventy-one, she moved lightly on her brittle ankles, the kind of ageless woman you find lapping the mall. She was trim as I was plump. And she had lost none of her wit either, easily countering Lance’s sarcasm with her own keen remarks. The roller skating bit was amusing; for I remembered a time from our youth that she had clattered through the upstairs hall with a pillow belted to her stomach, impersonating a hockey goaltender or some such nonsense.

Underneath the grime, the house was as I remembered, with its brocade sofas and gilded trim. There was the wallpaper I had once believed velvet, the gramophone with its polished cone I had held my ear against as if to the mouth of a seashell.

Arlene picked her way over the boxes and files, which I knew to be full of patient's records Bennie had kept during his optometry career. After he died, she cleared the closets and attic of his possessions, but instead of donating them to a re-sale shop or library, she scattered his clothes and papers about the furniture and floor where she could see them. Trophies – Bennie's bowling prizes – decorated the stovetop burners, which she admitted hadn't been ignited in months. Indeed, pizza boxes and cheeseburger wrappers littered the breakfast nook, giving it the appearance of a soda fountain after high school date night.

Upstairs, Lance shuffled through the basket on Arlene's dresser, pulling out old letters and family snapshots. He removed from its covering of tissue paper a framed black-and-white photograph of a tall man in flannel and denim who was seated on a fence post with a feed bucket balanced on his thigh. I immediately recognized him, though the image was proof that years had passed, for his hair was longer and his face had sunken to reveal a pair of knobby cheekbones. The snow-covered field behind him blended into the colorless sky. He appears to have been laughing impatiently when the shot was taken, for his eyebrows were raised as if deeming the whole idea of photography ridiculous.

"Explain this bloke for us, now," prodded Lance.

Arlene shook her head, rattling her tight curls like wind-blown reeds. "That's just my husband, out of his element," she explained, anxiously. "Probably the only time he'd ever set foot on a farm, that was."

That evening, she was in no mood to talk, and chastised me for waking her. “It’s a wonder you bothered to answer,” I bristled. “With me calling in the midst of her majesty’s nap.”

There was the shift of the bedcovers, the wheeze of springs. She slept in Lora’s room now, she told me, on the iron-frame daybed with the cream-colored duvet. The windows here overlooked a slope we used to call “the tumble hill” which, in summer, was speckled with forget-me-nots and Queen Anne’s lace. Further below the grassy shoulder was the small patchwork spread of Kelling’s Apple Farm. Seasonal pickers were hired from Canada, most of them loggers hoping to see a bit of the coast on the weekends or have a break from the mess halls, maple syrup pancakes and tight quarters of the bunk houses. Mrs. Kelling required they shear away their beards before starting at the orchard, an act which revealed white cheeks that quickly sunburned and matched the appearance of the ruddy fruit. There were six men each fall, ranging in age anywhere between seventeen and fifty. They not only gathered the yield, but tilled the side field and performed other chores. And remarkably, my mother told us, the Kelling’s – Ira and Grace – boarded those men in their own house. Just as if they were her own boys, Mrs. Kelling washed and ironed their clothes, trimmed their hair and encouraged them to attend the county barn dances on weekend nights. She cooked three hot meals a day and still managed time to mow the front lawn on a riding tractor. “Now, there’s a self-less woman,” my mother would proclaim with sincerity or spite, depending on her mood.

When we were old enough to take an interest in boys - this started of course with Lora, the oldest – we would huddle on the daybed, gripping the metal leaves of ivy and

spying through the curtains. Or we clustered on the tumble hill, weaving flower bracelets and daring each other to perform stunts for these wild creatures, who seemed as majestic as grizzlies from Canadian fable. From so far up, we could identify them only by color, red and blue checked shirts clamoring up ladders, dark patches of hair bobbing between the branches. An early frost would seize our hearts, warning of the proximity of the season's end. In winter, we gazed sullenly at the blanketed fields, the trees colorless and bare.

Arlene chose this room now, in the late of August, to hear the commotion of familiar production, to watch the boys cart the produce to the barn, prune branches, smoke forbidden cigarettes under the eaves of the outhouse shed. As if they were the first to pull such a stunt.

"Sorry I snapped at you," I confessed. "But why'd you say he was your husband? What would Bennie have thought if he knew you were talking in such a way?"

"Oh, Karen, don't be stupid. Paulson's brother sent that picture. And anyway, there's still plenty of Bennie's friends around who'd give their best china for any kind of gossip." She snorted at the idea. "So what should I've said? 'Why, don't you know? That there's my secret lover.' Would that have put things in the clear?"

"Was he, Arlene? All this time?"

"Of course not," she sighed, and I imagined her fixated on dust motes, believing them to be tiny manifestations of life's missed opportunities. "But I suppose you've a right to know certain things, seeing as you were once smitten with the idea of a man such as him, long before I was."

The house had many visitors, especially after Grandpa returned to occupy Lora's bedroom. She was, by this time, married and living in the city. He slung long sheets of fabric across the hardwood and arranged his easels atop these, though I rarely saw him paint. Instead, whenever I crept along the corridor – I was fourteen during his short reign under our roof – I observed him stretched along the length of the window ledge. He smoked cigarettes, not allowed in our mother's presence, and wore a flat cap that gave him the appearance of a jaunty newsboy. His gaze rested on the movement in the orchard, on the lulling urgency that occupied other men's lives.

He hosted dinner parties for his artist friends, gallery owners and anyone who expressed interest in his old work. These events started in the dining room, where exotic dishes – I remember the charred face of a duck without a bill twisting up from the platter like a diseased tree limb – were served on mother's china. Arlene and I were sometimes allowed to these feasts, though my mother insisted our attendance was merely an opportunity to practice table etiquette. We wore formal gowns with sashes. Arlene, by then, was seventeen and nearly finished with high school. Though still slender, her body appeared full and complete, while mine was still nudging against its childish skeleton. When the guests had consumed too much wine and began speaking of what my mother described as "adult matters," she shooed us upstairs to our homework. But we often met in my grandfather's room, shuffling across the fabric sheets to the window. In the valley, a bonfire would be burning and some of the apple pickers would bring out guitars and play ballads they'd learned on the plains. These were songs of love and loneliness - emotions that merged when sung with such longing.

Arlene once dared me to run to the orchard in my underclothes. I didn't, but she took off down the trellis in her nightgown, me hissing at her to come back, and sprinted as far as the great oak that jutted from the tumble hill like a pointing arm. I feared the men would stop their music, but the night was too dark, with only a sliver of moon, and Arlene shimmied back up to the sill unnoticed.

At the end of October, when frost threatened to destroy the remaining crop and the valley's vivid diorama, my grandfather invited the pickers, along with Mr. and Mrs. Kelling, up to the house for roast chicken. He knew the men would be returning to the logging camps or driving west to the California vineyards and maybe he felt he owed them for providing a few months of animation among the branches.

Since we had just returned from Tuesday craft hour, and before that, school, Arlene and I were allowed to the table in our casual clothes, though I snuck upstairs to change my blouse, having sweated through the first. My early teenage years proved difficult, with rashes of pimples down my neck and arms, dotting my nose and the backs of my thighs. I'd had to hold my arms against my sides to hide the odor of the perspiration that leaked through my shirt, which once proved rancid enough that Mrs. Hodgekins, my algebra teacher, had pulled me aside and asked whether my mother was allowing me to bathe often enough. But most devastating had been my incapability at the skills required to pass Home Economics. While the rest of my body grew plump, my bony fingers remained long and straight as twigs. Whenever asked to perform a simple task, to thread a needle or remove a hot tray of cookies from the oven, the tendons in my hands would clench and my fingers shook uncontrollably, as if from a great chill. It wasn't just that I couldn't tolerate others watching me complete such projects, because

even alone my stitches veered at angles and my cookie dough spread into a giant blob that spilled into the grills of the oven. It was a joke in my family that such creative genes – namely Grandpa’s – hadn’t been passed along, that they had got stuck in my mother’s womb. So any mention of my clumsiness embarrassed me, for I had yet to find a skill to which I was suited.

At the table were seated five of the apple pickers, Mr. and Mrs. Kelling, Mother, Father and Grandpa. They waited until Arlene and I were settled in our places, politely conversing while the smell of the steaming food churned up longing in their bellies. One of the men rose to deliver a blessing. He bowed his dark head, and I watched his pinched eyelids twitching as he spoke of the fine day and the finer meal. Then we passed dishes, introduced ourselves and ate. We learned that the man who had blessed our food was Paulson Douglass, a Swedish immigrant who traveled between logging camps in Manitoba and his cousin’s horse farm in Fort Francis, Ontario. He had been traveling by train to New York City, where he had another cousin, and heard of the job on the Kelling Farm.

He was a beautiful creature, young and tall with a white smile unpolluted by chewing tobacco. After the wine had been passed, he and the other men prodded us about boyfriends, though at the time, not even Arlene had had one. My mother quickly shushed them and steered the meal conversation to farming equipment, a subject I believe no one at the table, including her, had any interest in discussing.

On the balcony after dinner, the men gathered to smoke. My grandfather identified constellations and told a story about the coast. It was a tale I’d heard many times before, about the whale he saw tip a cruise liner over onto its smokestack. I sat on

the loveseat and watched the fog of my breath. Paulson held out a square of chewing gum for me, and then unwrapped one for himself from its tinfoil.

“Does your grandfather really see such things as a whale? Here, in America?”

I shrugged, and made room for him beside me on the cushion. “He sees what he likes to see.”

“I greatly enjoy his paintings in the hall. The one of the yellow fishing boat caught in the storm, do you know? My father had a yellow boat in Sweden when I was a boy. He was trapped in a storm too, this is how he died and why I come here. And when I see this picture, and I think, maybe your grandfather knew of the story of my father. But that is not possible, of course.” He laughed and looked toward the other men, perhaps hoping they hadn’t heard his confession.

“It’s sad. If you were to tell Grandpa the story of your father in the yellow boat, he would somehow make it into his own.”

“Ah, well. I will keep it for myself then.”

We talked for a while longer, about school and the apple farm, also about his ambitions to become a pastor. “Of course I would have to the school of the Bible, and I do not like school so much.”

Then my mother stepped onto the balcony, followed by Arlene, who’d been stuck clearing away the dishes. “Time for school girls to start their homework,” Mother said, and I remember only how when I stood saying my goodnights, the stars seemed to quiver, as if the whole sky had tilted off-balance.

I was unable to sleep. I imagined Paulson sinking in the yellow boat, calling to me, but my clumsy hands couldn’t hold the rope. I took this as a sign, and decided to



leave early for the bus stop. Instead of continuing straight past the orchard, I cut under the trees toward the barn. The men were stacking crates in a produce truck. The air smelled of snow.

When I was finally noticed, peering into the barn in my ridiculous red rain coat, one of the men joked that I looked like I was up to no good. “She’s got something up her sleeve, for sure,” another added.

“I have something for Paulson,” I said, blushing, and they grinned, showing stained teeth. One mumbled something in French that stirred laughter through the bunch.

Paulson emerged from behind a tower of crates, wiping his forehead. When he drew close, I could smell the work on him. We crossed behind the barn and I immediately started jabbering on about how my grandfather had overheard the story of the sinking boat and wanted Paulson to have the painting. I unclasped my bag and thrust the bundle into his hands. I had wrapped it in an ugly old lap blanket my grandmother had knitted from her scrap yarn.

“He just wouldn’t want you to say anything. No thank you notes – he hates such things. He’ll know you appreciate it. He was embarrassed to bring it himself, said you would’ve refused it out of kindness – that’s the kind of man you are, he said. He wanted me to tell you that art belongs to those who have lived it, that you would understand.”

Paulson looked down at the corner of gray canvas showing through the yarn. “Your grandfather, he is a good man,” he said, then pulled me against him in a hard embrace.

Invigorated by my lie, I sprinted down the Kelling’s drive, splattering specks of muddy gravel on my stockings. I felt Paulson’s warmth clinging to me. Arlene was

hunched inside the lean-to shelter, reading *East of Eden*. “What’s got you in a huff?” she asked.

“Forgot my math homework. Had to cut up the hill.”

I waited for further questioning, but her eyes resumed their journey across the page. How readily these lies sprang from me!

The faded rectangle of wallpaper revealed its secret long after the apple pickers had gone and the snow had settled on our world. Grandpa was furious. “My favorite painting,” he growled, though I think he would have said this regardless of what had gone missing. When he questioned me, I confessed I had seen one of the Frenchmen conceal the canvas in his jacket after dinner, though I’d been too frightened to tell anyone. I added the effect of tears, and as a result, was granted a shopping trip with Mother that evening to soothe my senses.

This newly discovered talent for fabrication should have disgusted me, but I found I couldn’t deny myself the thrill of inventing stories. At the high school, I whispered to my classmates of scandalous love affairs between our teachers. I once relayed to my parents details of a sailor who’d followed me home – a tale which led them to search the property with flashlights while I raided their sock drawer for folding money. I soon became so convincing in my elaborations, I sometimes forgot whether a thing had happened or if I had merely willed it into being, fooling myself with my own deceptions.

Arlene married an optometrist, Benjamin Yeager, on her nineteenth birthday and they moved to the suburbs. They shared a love of travel, and I received postcards from five continents in ten years. I left the great house just two years after Arlene did,

marrying a traveling vacuum salesman I had gotten into a bad situation with. We had our first child, a girl, and moved to Trenton, financially cut off from my parents until my mother admitted she couldn't bear seeing her grandchildren in clothes from the Salvation Army. Lora had relocated to London, where she lived with a man not her husband. We lost contact with her for many years – she being closer in age to our mother than to us, and therefore, too distant for friendship and true sisterhood – though she died a few years ago of heart disease.

After our parents died, there was question as to which of the sisters should occupy the great house, as it was a place in need of constant upkeep. There was no mention of selling, both of us aware that such a structure embodied as much of our family as we who had occupied it. Since my husband had just opened a paint store and our children had settled into friendships and school districts we didn't want to sever them from, Arlene and Bennie decided to retire early and take up at the house. They could certainly afford to live idly, with Bennie's income and our family inheritance. He opened a small practice in town and accumulated a customer base of retired farmers and mill workers. She spent her days collecting trinkets at garage sales and downstate flea markets. They were forced to stop traveling by plane after Bennie had knee surgery and started using a cane. Arlene resented his health condition, blaming him for his years of jogging on pavement, for twisting his leg in a touch football game. She became depressed and stopped taking care of the chores, allowing the laundry to pile up until Bennie carted both of their wardrobes to the dry cleaners. He began eating his meals at the town diner, and slept on the living room sofa in front of the television. These new grudges against each other boiled down to the fact that they were getting old, and realizing it. There was nothing occupying their

lives but thoughts of death, and they began to experience in their marriage the kind of shared loneliness that made them want to be alone.

It was spring of the sixth year back at the house, Arlene explained, when she received the letter from Paulson.

“Residents of the Harbinger house: I write as a friend and former neighbor. Pleasant memories of a dinner party hosted by a Mr. Alfred Scott Harbinger remain with me, and I felt I should acknowledge my gratitude after so many years. I have been confined to my bed of late with tuberculosis. My doctor says I will not last the month, though he’s been making such proclamations for a year. After leaving New York, I obtained English lessons and began my schooling at the Bible College in Toronto. I was ordained as a pastor four years later. I returned to live with my cousin Lars on his horse farm, seeing as the church could barely pay for a building large enough to hold a congregation, much less for my employment.

I have hesitated to write such a note describing my feelings, but if I continue this stubbornness any longer, I may be writing from my grave! I have a recollection from the dinner party of Mr. Harbinger’s eldest granddaughter, Arlene, who was visible through the glass doors of the balcony taking our plates to the kitchen. I watched her eating a scrap of chicken from the platter – such an innocent act, for she had barely touched her meal in the presence of so many poorly mannered men (I include myself in this description). She continued to eat the mashed potatoes and asparagus, wiping her mouth on the hem of her skirt. That image has stayed with me, and made me smile through many years. To think that I observed a lifetime’s worth of grace in a single act!”

Arlene said she read these words, and went to the day bed in Lora's room. She kneeled on its forgotten mattress, parting the sheer curtains to gaze upon the quiet valley in its budding glory. She tried to picture Paulson, but saw only what his confession represented: opportunity. Desire had sprung in her its selfish trap of possession. She wanted her life, yes, but she wanted to sample another. To realize she had had such a lasting affect on a man not her husband was enough to rouse her from her boredom and to the closet where the suitcases were stowed.

(If I had been offered such a chance, would I have taken it? Am I so tied to my sister's thoughts and decisions that I can't be disgusted by them, jealous? I soothe myself with lies: it was me he had loved first, wasn't it.)

Arlene arrived three days later at the Fort Francis train station, a wooden shelter supported on slanting beams. She walked on the gravel shoulder toward the buildings she saw nestled in a valley. The wind whipped her hair and the meadow reeds beside the road. Not a single car passed until she reached town with her dusty suitcase. She went into the first building she came to – a fabric shop – and asked the owner for directions to the Douglass farm. The woman was broad-shouldered and wore a baggy brown dress that made her plain among so many rich patterns and textures.

“You meanin’ Lars? He got the horses? Well, I hope you aren’t planning on walking, would take a day and a half.”

This was who she had come to see, yes. But also the brother, a preacher.

“He wasn’t preaching but a year afore he took sick. Can’t say it wasn’t the best thing for all of us, what with him always harping about Sweden and this apple farm he worked at one summer. What these places had to do with any of us, I don’t know. Anyway, I heard his time might be up soon. ‘Course I don’t get out much anymore to know what the gossip is these days.” The woman stopped talking and sized up Arlene’s lacy skirt and blouse with the pearl buttons. “If you’re willing to wait a few minutes, I’ll close up here – not that a soul would notice – and drive you.”

And so, within half an hour, she was waving goodbye to the shop owner and standing on a strange farm, wondering the best way to go about things. She had explained to Bennie that a high school friend – “You remember Shelley, don’t you?” – had taken ill and needed help until her daughter could make it up from Florida. This was who she had claimed to be visiting. Before she reached the porch, a teenaged girl pushed open the screen door and stood with her arms crossed over her chest. “You the piano teacher?” She was skinny and had her hair done in braids with navy-colored ribbons tied around the ends to match her jersey skirt. This manner of dress made her appear much younger than she must have been, and innocent, which was also not the case.

“Does Paulson Douglass live here?”

“Boy, you’re an American to boot!” the girl exclaimed. “Well. He did ‘til Sunday. My daddy says it’s the best thing coulda happened, him finally dying. I shore won’t miss hearing him hacking up his insides.”

Arlene paused, looking back at the road and concealing the hopeful tears that had sprung from the sting of the wind. “Would you tell your mother I’ve come to pay my respects?”

The girl wrinkled her nose. “Ma’s been dead so long I sometimes forget I had one. And my daddy’s out in the barn. He don’t give two figs who I let in the house. You wanna see Uncle Paul’s old bedroom, maybe?”

The front hallway reeked so strongly of wet dog and celery that she felt she was standing in a root cellar. Three pairs of muddy boots lay askew on the rag rug beside the door along with a neglected metal boot scraper. An upright piano stood in the corner of the tiny living room. Arlene set her suitcase out of the way and followed the bobbing braids upstairs. The walls were bare aside from a crucifix and a smudged mirror. The smell was worse up in the hot corridor, like boiled stew.

“Right in there’s where he died,” the girl said, indicating the closed door with her toe. “I got piano lessons, if the teacher ever shows up. Wouldn’t bother me if she didn’t. In the meantime, I’ll be doing the cooking. You staying for supper?”

Arlene confessed that she hadn’t planned that far ahead and bent to look at her reflection in the low-hung glass. She smoothed back her wild, knotty hair and pinched her cheeks to add color, as if preparing to meet someone.

The room was atrocious. Pillowcases and twisted sheets were stained with sweat and blood. Undershirts and socks hung from the back of the desk chair. Bloody tissues had been scattered across the rug, and a damp hand towel was draped over the headboard. Crusted vomit clung to one edge of the rug. On the table was a milk glass vase full of wilted daisies, and also a set of books about the English royalty. A tablet was open to a page that read, “To appreciate simple things is to know heaven,” “Mrs. May Gilbert, born 1923,” and “A narwhal inhabits the coldest water of all whale species.” She wondered at the significance of such an odd accumulation of facts and phrases. Across the room

beside the closet hung her grandfather's painting. So he had stolen it, after all, she observed. The sight of so familiar an object amidst such filth was enough to make her gag. Though the window was open, inviting earthy aromas of soil and the sweet grass, Arlene said she had to hold her head against the curtains to feel the dry breeze and ease back whatever had crept up from her stomach.

She quietly shut the door and went downstairs, a bit dizzy. Lars was in the kitchen drying his hands on a dirty towel while the girl poured vegetables into a strainer in the sink. Steam puffed up in her face.

"Would it be too much to ask for a glass of water? I've had nothing since the train," Arlene admitted, supporting herself against the doorframe.

"Course," the girl said, "Help yourself to whatever's in the ice box."

She found a bottle of milk that she poured into the chipped glass offered her from the girl's bony hand.

"I'm Liza, by the way. You staying the night? You'll have to take the couch, if you do."

"Well, to be honest, I don't know." She looked at Lars. His face was shorter and broader than she remembered Paulson's being, and his hair was still a healthy gray. He wore denim overalls and a short-sleeved work shirt. "I'd heard about your brother's condition and wanted to visit before anything worse happened, but. I knew him during his apple picking days. I guess I don't know what I'll do now that I'm here."

"Well, my thinking is you wouldn't have wanted to see him," Lars said, "We're glad he finally went, seeing how miserable he was. Thin as something out of them Holocaust camps." He carried the pot of vegetables to the card table with its four folding



chairs arranged around it. Liza removed a platter of sliced bread and cheese from the refrigerator and set it beside the plates and silverware. They both sat. Lars looked at Arlene expectantly, already buttering his bread. "You going to join us, or should I drive you to the hotel in town?"

In the morning, she folded the sheets and blanket – thankfully clean - that they'd provided and boiled water for tea on the range. The house was quiet. She searched the cupboards and found all the dishes had been put away dirty, the mugs were stained with coffee dregs and flatware was sticky with bits of food. "A nasty way of living," was how she described it to me. She set about washing the pots and pans stacked in the sink. Once these were clean and drying on a tea cloth, she scrubbed everything from the cupboards, even the champagne flutes on the top shelf. With this complete, she found a broom and ridded the linoleum of the accumulated hair and dirt, sweeping it onto a paper plate and tossing it all into the back yard. By now, the sun had risen and Lars had stumbled down to drink the coffee she had made before he went out to hay the barn. She had always believed farmers were early-risers. Throughout the afternoon, she swept and dusted and hung clean fabric on the line. Without asking permission, she emptied Paulson's room, saving his notes, sermons and books on the desk, but burning the sheets and her grandfather's painting in a corner of the lot, where the horses wouldn't be disturbed by the smell of fire. She prepared a supper of green beans and pork chops thawed from the ice box.

A week progressed this way, with Arlene walking along the straight road after dinner in Lars' heavy barn coat or sometimes leading a shy old mare named Colonel Ruffington around his paddock. Twice they drove into town for root beer floats. Liza

took opportunities to ask Arlene about American cinema and that pesky visitor she called her “monthly women’s thing.” She raided Arlene’s wardrobe and fingered the lovely buttons and ribbons. Lars kept his distance, but longed to press up against her in the dark hall, to feel sweet warmth of devotion. The three of them silently agreed there was something pleasant in the new routine, the awkward family structure. But she had already committed herself to another life, another man, and such promises she had decided to keep.

She didn’t sleep on the train, even when the cars stalled for an hour in the hushed nocturnal wilderness. A problem down the line, no reason for worry. Down on the moonlit path beside the tracks, a doe stepped timidly from the woods and sniffed at the ground. Her hair was gray and matted, like that of an unkempt dog. Arlene said the morose thought crossed her mind that she had never seen a dead deer except on the highway or in the pages of hunting magazines. Uncertainty settled in her stomach, for she considered that such a thought had arisen to prepare her to witness some violent end. She shuddered, wondering if she would see something rare and beautiful, a mountain lion, or a bear.

But the train rumbled to life, revived after a quick hibernation, and resumed its fluid voyage toward the sea. Arlene watched the sun rise over the pines. The station came into view with its chimney puffing warmth into the cool morning. As they eased to a halt, she saw Bennie separate himself from the crowd and wave blindly at the tinted windows. How ridiculous he looked, squinting at the glass through his bifocals, hobbling along with his cane. How endearing.

She admitted to me her shame at having to fabricate details of her visit: something about a stomach flu developed after eating raw cookie dough, Shelley's little dog that had slept with his hot belly against her toes, and Shelley herself, insolent and demanding even on her sickbed. ("Oh Karen, I was such a liar and a fool," she said, and over the line I heard the crinkle of a tissue beside the mouthpiece. "A damned old fool.")

She stepped onto the platform with her bags and allowed herself to be embraced. The old wet wool of her husband's coat revealed he'd been out walking in the rain, missing her. A good man.

"I'd like a long nap and a hot shower," she confessed, wrapping her arm through his.

"We'll be there before you know it."

Soothed by the rattle of the car heater, she said she thought of her life and how it had passed in such a hurry. Moments were packed away like boxes in an attic, only to be opened after she could no longer recall their significance.

She dozed with her cheek against the frosty glass, oblivious to the lonely fields, the orchard. When they pulled in the drive, Bennie nudged her awake and carried her things inside. He followed her upstairs and helped her remove her shoes and socks, tucked her under the warm-smelling sheets. He closed the drapes against the day and she realized then that the journey was over, she was home.

"Karen?"

I sighed, unraveled the phone cord. "I'm not angry Arlene. Just, surprised."

“I always felt like maybe my body had gone off in one direction when it was meant to go another, you know? I had to see for myself. You would’ve done the same, wouldn’t you?”

“I’m not so sure about that,” I snapped, but we both knew what I would’ve chosen.

“It’s better I told you? No more secrets or surprise house cleanings?” She laughed and we sat on opposite ends of the line, agreeing to a silent truce.

“I best be going,” I said. “I’ve got a load of wash in, don’t want it to wrinkle.”

“Well, wait. Wait just another minute, Karen, there was something else I wanted to tell you. Did you hear that man from town, a lawyer I think, bought up the Kelling property?”

For some reason this, so unexpected, made me light-headed.

“He’s planning on running the orchard this season, but I hear he might turn the house into a bed and breakfast. Tear down the barn and put a swimming pool in too. It just aggravates me, you know, people think they can go about messing things up, things that’ve been good for so many years, just free as they please.”

“That’s such a small thing, Arlene,” I said. “Compared to all else that’s changed.”

## A-FRAME

In middle school, my mother made me take cello lessons. She'd been cleaning the attic after my father moved out and found the instrument in its hard black shell. The varnish had faded and the velvet inside the case smelled stale. Though she could no longer remember how to tune the strings or play even the simplest of chords, she proclaimed visions of me on a stage, awing thousands with solos for the symphony orchestra.

I don't know how she found Mrs. Hoffman. Her services weren't advertised in the classifieds or posted on flyers in the church lobby (I'd checked, after Mother announced her plans for me). But one afternoon, a short wisp of a woman, much younger than she appeared, ducked into our foyer with her floral-printed handbag clutched against her chest. Her dark curls were pinned under a flat cap and her cheeks had been rouged with blush too dark for her skin. The hem of her striped dress treaded above her knees, revealing a run in her stockings. While I was warming coffee, Mother came into the kitchen giggling. "Isn't she a little rag doll?" she whispered. "Those clothes."

After chatting, the women agreed I could begin lessons every Thursday, but these would be at Mrs. Hoffman's house, where she had her three children to tend to. Since my mother had social responsibilities at the women's club and the homeless shelter where she volunteered, Mrs. Hoffman was also required to pick me up for these sessions. I had to hold the cello awkwardly between my legs, since the children occupied the back seat and the spare tire rode in the trunk. Once we reached the apartment, the girls ran to display for me their trinkets and tattered hair ribbons. Mrs. Hoffman arranged her baby

boy on a blanket near the space heater. The rooms were in the basement of a squat brick building and were the smallest I'd ever seen. Concrete poles divided the space. Old sheets and towels had been knotted around the bases of these posts to "protect young skulls," as Mrs. Hoffman explained. In all the time I was there, I never saw Mr. Hoffman, but was told he was "a very busy man with a very important job". She pulled out two of the dining chairs and sat facing me. I began to unfasten the clasps of my cello case.

"I wish I could help you with that," she said, in a tone that indicated the opposite. "But there are more important things you'll need to learn, if you want to be an adult."

She led me to the diaper pail where a stack of wet white cloths had been covered with blue disinfectant. She explained how to pin the cloth in a way that was secure, but loose enough for the baby to move his legs. In the backyard, we clipped soggy undershirts and socks to the line. Over the course of a month, she had instructed me in proper sweeping, dish-washing, dusting, polishing and folding techniques. I could sing the baby to sleep, braid hair, tie tiny laces, thread a needle, bake almond cookies. And always, the cello case remained unopened at the base of the stairs. It got so that once Mrs. Hoffman deposited me and the children at their apartment, she would just lounge in her rocking chair, smoking clove cigarettes and reading magazines.

In spring, I quit the lessons without Mother knowing. While Mrs. Hoffman knocked at the door to pick me up, I hid in the linen closet. What could she do? If she told my mother, I would reveal the still-crisp pages of my music books, my rubbed-raw knees and hands.

I propped the cello behind the door in the guest bathroom and went out in my rain coat. I crossed the back lawn into the wooded ravine to avoid Mrs. Hoffman, if she was

lurking at the curbside. If the day was cool, I'd walk along the divot where rainwater collected in spring. Blackbirds called out warnings and hopped among the leaves. My free afternoons hung before me like a carousel ring, a prize to grab and embrace. And this prize was not only the fresh woodland air, but also the realization that being a child unencumbered with responsibility was a thing to hold on to for as long as I could.

Once, feeling bold, I walked across town to Mrs. Hoffman's apartment. She answered the door in the same floral dress she had worn to my mother's house. She held a mixing bowl in her hands and the heavy smell of garlic rose from the corridor. I told her I had decided to quit lessons and that my mother would be sending the last check. I reassured her I wasn't there to cause trouble and that our secret would remain. But after all I had said, she just stood squinting out of the dark stairwell, as if it was I who had somehow betrayed her.

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My college geology professor had to leave before finals week to attend to a family emergency. The department secretary was instructed to prepare our study guides, a practice test and the final exam, all of which required us to identify rocks.

The night before we retrieved the study packets from her desk, she went out for a seafood dinner with one of the college librarians. Both were divorced and considered by many past marriageable age. But despite the judgments of their friends and enemies, love bobbed in the wine glasses, spiced the clams and slid down their throats like pearls on lush cushions of oyster. She had forgotten her allergy to shellfish and when her tongue swelled against the roof of her mouth, she believed it flushed with desire. As they ran

down the sidewalk to avoid the rain, she blamed the quickness of her breath on lack of exercise, she scolded the tremors of her heart. In the steamy warmth of the backseat, they watched rain blur the black river, water on water, and came together with the clumsy grace of new lovers. As she whimpered and gasped, he congratulated his tongue's renewed skill. But when he returned from below to kiss her mouth, he found her cheeks bloated and her eyes vacant as a fish's.

At the hospital, she was administered antibiotics and allowed bed rest until the swelling of her throat diminished. She tried to whisper something the librarian believed to be a jumbled profession of love. Then she became adamant, summoning him to fetch her oversized purse from the table, from which she removed a bundle of papers. She had meant to make copies earlier that evening, but had become preoccupied with makeup application and hair curling. Each paper was printed with an image of a rock and numbers that corresponded with a list on her desk. She handed him a key and wrote instructions needed produce the study guides.

He drove to campus after midnight. Alone in the strange basement, he shivered and hurried past tiny dinosaur skeletons toward the archive. Rocks were housed in individual drawers. Most of the labels had come unglued over time and were stuck to the floor. He removed the samples and arranged them on a tray. He couldn't find the list among the papers on her desk, or in the waste bins that had been emptied earlier that evening. Finally, he used an old earth science text to gather rock names and applied them to the study guides. After all, he concluded, he had passed geology in college. He made the copies and arranged them neatly on his lover's desk.



Even after a semester, most of us didn't know the difference between basalt and alabaster, quartz and feldspar. This was an introductory course required of freshmen. We needed a passing grade to vault us into the accounting and speech classes that would teach us skills we needed to earn money. Of course no one noticed that the stone images didn't correspond with their proper names. Obsidian had been claimed as limestone, limestone pumice. We spent the weekend memorizing the pairings on our worksheets, and on the day of the final exam, we confidently regurgitated our knowledge onto the page. When our professor returned to twenty-five failed tests, he beckoned the secretary, who grudgingly summoned the librarian. (Their affair ended after the secretary discovered she couldn't disassociate his kisses from the taste of seafood). The librarian admitted his improvisation. Our professor could do nothing but grant A's and send us letters of apology. We were stunned to realize we'd been so easily fooled. We reminded each other that the images had seemed a bit grainy, that enough time hadn't been allotted. It wasn't our fault, we reassured ourselves.

But despite all the confusion of that first semester, most of us attained degrees, found jobs, raised families. At our ten-year reunion, we discovered that three of our schoolmates had made a lot of money developing a rock and mineral classification system still used in America's classrooms. We can't help believing we had some part in this success, and for that, we are proud.

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While my dad was in re-hab, I moved into my aunt's house, where the walls were daisy yellow and the heat cranked high. This was right after I had graduated college and was still trying to figure out what to do with my life.

Though it was late January, my aunt wore a Christmas sweater with leaping reindeer, a pair of men's gray sweatpants and thermal socks for her circulation. It was strange to remember she was my mother's sister.

The room I occupied had once belonged to my cousin, but had been converted into a combination sewing and storage area for neglected toys and clothes. A trundle bed was positioned directly under the window and at night a draft filtered through the curtains. The blue bedspread had a faded yellow square where sunlight had dozed undisturbed for the last seven years. Over the headboard hung a watercolor of a monarch and on the wall opposite the bed was a crucifix with a plain cross and soapstone body.

My aunt prepared a bed on the corduroy couch and a meal of turkey and gravy and pie for my boyfriend, who had driven up for a weekend visit. She scurried about the kitchen, refilling drinks and rinsing dishes. In the afternoon, she left for bridge club, the bi-weekly outing that guaranteed us a few hours. The trundle bed squeaked on its rusty wheels and springs and I was glad the windows were closed against our noise.

My boyfriend woke the next morning and came into my room. "I had this crazy dream," he said. I hate hearing other people's dreams. "That Jesus," he said, nodding toward the crucifix, "he climbed down off the cross and was crawling toward me on the carpet. But he was still small, right? Still that size. There was part of the sheet hanging down on the floor, and I was like, 'Pull up the covers. Don't let him up here!' but you

said, 'No, we have to. We have to let him up and tell him what we've done.' Creepy, huh?"

After he left, I couldn't stop imagining the tiny Jesus scuttling across the floor. My mind adorned him with pointed teeth, a foaming mouth. His ribs protruded and sometimes burst his malnourished skin. I wore heavy socks to bed and set my shoes on top of the sewing machine. The covers encased me like a mummy. Shivering and unable to sleep, I reasoned that I wasn't even what you'd call a religious person anymore. Still, the vacant, downcast eyes forced me to dress in the bathroom, to pleasure myself only in the shower. I finally built my nerve up to remove the crucifix from its perch and hide it between a stack of towels in the linen closet. Whenever my aunt entered the room, I made sure to stand so my head blocked the faded silhouette of the cross, though I hardly think she noticed. At night, I envisioned the mini-Jesus suffocated on his bed of terry-cloth swaddling. He choked with anger and vowed vengeance.

So I snuck him to the cemetery. This was in the middle of the day, and old people were knelt over headstones, arranging wilted flowers. The realization that I would someday be old or know a person who had died struck me then. You feel these pangs when you return your childhood home after being away or when you see something - sunlight on the river, a wind chime swirling its metal music - that reminds you how life will continue long after you have died. This is what I felt, and would feel many times again. I quickly set to selecting an unmarked plot, on which I dug deep enough so that the cross would stand supported by the soil. I pushed the base down far enough to allow his pale feet to touch the grass. We were reconciled: he no longer had to be suspended over

an indifferent female, and for the remainder of my stay with my aunt, I slept ten peaceful hours every night.

When my dad finally quit drinking, he said it was like some hidden part of him had swallowed his old wretched self. He said he had been re-born. I laughed and told him not to push it. You only get one chance, I wanted to remind him, though of course he already knew that. He knew, as I did, and as everyone does, that the person you are born as will someday be marked by some slab or figurine, or else scattered on a mountain or lake you were once fond of. People and animals and fish and insects will move over the water or soil that protects your bones, unaware that someone's spirit is concealed in that sacred earth.

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Twice a day, I walk my dog past the bank. We turn at the barren corner lot, where a For Sale sign has stood since we moved here six months ago, and then continue along the row of industrial and medical buildings until we reach the railroad tracks.

If the day is cold, I busy myself counting buildings and windows. This is how I noticed the unmarked A-frame structure across the street from the empty lot. I couldn't take my eyes from it then, so large and green were the windows, so intricate the clouded sky projected onto the glass. Weathered gray siding met the roof at a single point, giving the structure the appearance of an old country church. Along the road, a shield of tall hedges protruded over the sidewalk and into the bike lane, blocking the building from close view.

When the afternoon sun dipped low, I could see a curved row of purple metal railing on a high platform, a cluster of desks and people suspended as if on the prow of a ship. Yet there were no signs indicating the name of any business conducted within. Cars were parked in a small lot, but always in the same spaces.

One night, I jogged to the gravel lot behind the A-frame, hoping for clues. I pulled back the dumpster lid and shone my pocket light into the depths, but the bin was empty. The green paint of the interior had been eaten away by rust.

A woman's voice startled me. She had the back door propped with her hip. Her hair fell in greasy strands down her neck.

"What do you do here?" I asked.

"Do?"

"For work, for money. Your job."

She looked uneasy and lowered her voice. "We're not supposed to talk outside." She motioned for me to follow her down the carpeted corridor and to the bathroom. The ventilation system above the toilets provided a drone that concealed our voices.

"We do nothing," she whispered. "We hide here."

"From what?"

"Everything. From the world, from obligation."

We dangled our legs from the polished sink counter while she explained that she had an acute fear of physical or mental labor, owls, flying in airplanes, salt water, seafood, vanilla bean ice cream, social situations involving men, her grandmother, sex, white rice and a sensation that death lurked around the corner. Think of all the moments, she explained, stolen by obligations. Think of how differently we could have lived if we

only had to answer to ourselves. The places we would or wouldn't have gone. Getting out of bed, she confided, had sometimes been a chore. But, of course, nothing was a difficult thing to do for a long time. That's why everything needed for survival and entertainment could be found here, she said. A garden had been cultivated in an office with a skylight. A library offered historical romances and mysteries, but unfortunately was lacking in every other genre. Children were encouraged as guests, though the few I saw were slumped in front of the second floor television or trying to tie their pet garter snake in a knot.

We all slept on the cushioned benches, using each other's stomachs as pillows. You had to choose wisely, or you could be stuck with a real grumbler. Meals were heated in the break room microwave, and I soon discovered all the possibilities flour tortillas and grape jelly offered. An inflatable swimming pool served as our bathtub.

Conflicts arose. One woman had an aversion to my dog. I started using an old typewriter I found in a storage closet, but soon one of the men informed me that the noise of the keyboard was giving him migraines. And when I woke everyone, as a joke, with an off-key rendition of "Surrey with the Fringe on Top," I was delegated to the janitor's closet until dinnertime.

After a month, so many people had moved into the A-frame that food portions had to be rationed, as well as bathroom time and sleeping quarters. Music was banned, as well as exercise in the halls. My only outfit developed holes and stains. When I could summon the strength to sniff my armpit, I caught a terrible whiff and began to miss my apartment. I longed for the selection of fiction on my bookshelf, my lumpy sofa and the detachable showerhead that could reach every inch. While I munched my breakfast

quesadilla, I daydreamed about peanut butter rice krispie treats, geometric shapes of chocolate and pizza. I remembered my unwatered plants and how my dog loved chasing squirrels on the bike trail.

I stumbled out the back door and into the sunlight. I bought a ticket to a distant country, where I wrote a prize-winning fable about a cloistered society living in an undisclosed location in the western hemisphere.

When I returned home five weeks later, flushed with suntan, I hurried the dog across the vacant lot. Behind the A-frame, cars were missing from their spaces. Shrubbery had been trimmed back to reveal sidewalk and a large realty sign stood on the lawn announcing that the property had been seized by the government. I banged on the locked door and cupped my hands to the glass. Corridors ticked with the day's stored heat, abandoned desks stood moored to the tile.

Of course, the people from the A-frame had been obligated to acquire jobs, sign mortgages, start families like the rest of us. Nothing can't last forever. From across the street, I watched sunlight shimmer on the windows like seaweed in water and wondered what kind of business would soon inhabit the building. And still, a whimsical part of me imagined the pioneers of nothing concealed behind the reflection, doing the nothing they'd always longed to do.

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After my dog died, I retired from the newspaper industry and took up painting, which I realized I was quite good at. My show premiered at the only gallery in our small town, where people were used to seeing vivid western landscapes and ceramic horses. As

a result, they found my work complex and surreal. Figures leapt through the bright or sometimes dark landscapes. The detailed face of a man was juxtaposed beside a featureless woman. Woodland animals peeked from behind skyscrapers, businessmen and military generals lounged under a giant tree with stars in its branches.

“Is this supposed to be Adam and Eve?” one man asked. “What’s the significance of the bacon and eggs?” wondered another. I refused to provide any answers, admitting that I had none. “I just paint what’s in my head,” I explained.

No one purchased anything. But when the gallery owner replaced the canvases with elk-on-foggy-morning and bear-beside-frozen-stream images, residents complained and refused to enter the shop. “We like her style, but we don’t understand it!” they shouted from the sidewalk. The gallery owner visited me at my top floor apartment, where I greeted him in a paint-splattered smock. After he told me what he had in mind, I frowned, but agreed, since I needed the money.

The new commission opened at the gallery six months later. I hadn’t simplified my paintings, and instead had taken great care to muddy the lines between realism and absurdity. People demanded explanations. The gallery owner was furious. My mailbox filled with angry letters. I didn’t respond and stayed in the apartment, for which I could barely afford rent anymore. The prospect of another unsuccessful show daunted me, and I hid away my paints.

Three weeks later, the gallery owner climbed the three hundred sixty two stairs to my apartment and pounded on the door. Since I never bothered to lock the deadbolt anymore, he pushed in and found me in a ragged sweater and pair of sweatpants. My face was sallow and pale and my hair hung like vines around my cheekbones. After a few



moments, I had to lie down, so weak were my legs from lack of exercise. Seated on the edge of my mattress, the gallery owner made a final proposition. Sadly, I nodded, but wondered aloud, “Why do you have to understand something to appreciate it?”

He held the canvases for me as I dipped the brush in a crusted pot of green. My arm lurched up and smudged the lower half of the cloth, and then repeated this motion with a shade of blue at the top. I replicated this pattern on several blank canvases before sinking back onto my pillow, where I would remain for the next few days until the ghost of my dog showed up to remind me I still had plenty of squirrels to chase in my life (he spoke in terms he understood).

The gallery owner displayed the new paintings at the back of the shop. One woman claimed the Holy Virgin was visible in the streak of paint. Another saw an eye shedding an acidic tear. Finally, a man suggested an elk poised before a clear blue sky. Joyful agreement rose from the crowd. There was the cracking open of leather wallets and purses, the plastic snap of credit cards hitting the countertop. “Simple!” they exclaimed. “Beautiful! We’ll take it!”

## CAREFUL

When Ernest first saw Grace, she was wearing rubber gloves and scrubbing blood out of a pair of women's underpants too big to be her own. He had hurried into the Washmat to use the toilet during his lunch break, having foolishly consumed two chili cheese dogs and a side of onion rings, and from across the room, watched as she bent to itch her nose against the back of her wrist. The sight of underclothes so close to her face thrilled and disgusted him, and he felt an overwhelming urge to protect her. But he was shy and couldn't bring himself to speak to her for weeks; it took Grace just as long to notice him staring at her reflection through the security mirror over the back row of dryers.

It was the beginning of summer between her junior and senior years of college, and she had decided not to return in the fall. She'd told no one, aware what her parents and friends would say and how they would say it. A pursing of lips, slow nodding: the same reactions they'd had when she'd announced she gotten a job at the Washmat in Rock Island and leased an apartment nearby. Her father had offered to pay her three thousand dollars if she agreed not to work there, or anywhere else that summer. He confided he didn't want her living in a neighborhood full of gang members and malnourished children, he said it was careless: a girl alone in the city. So they compromised. She would allow him to move her into the upstairs of a frame shop on 35<sup>th</sup> Street if she could keep the Washmat job and have the experience of living on her own. She was twenty-one, after all, legally adult.

In the evenings after work, Ernest walked to the Food Pride on the other side of the Washmat so he could glimpse Grace through the windows. Usually, she sat with her legs dangling from one of the rumbling washers, her gaze focused on the television bolted to the ceiling, an open can of ravioli beside her. Her dyed blond hair showed dark roots, her legs sprouted stubble. He imagined she couldn't afford razors; she went days without seeking approval from her reflection. This hygienic act of defiance was part of her new autonomous self: she could look and act however she wanted, had to impress no one.

In early July, Ernest dropped off a load of shirts with the other attendant – a skinny old woman with teeth tiny as pearls, and realized he didn't know the girl's name, though he'd been watching her for weeks now.

“Is that blond girl here?”

“Grace is off tonight.” Grace.

“Leave it for morning, then. Please,” he added. He was thirty-seven years old, had lived alone for nine.

“It's the detergent does all the work,” the woman argued. “It don't matter much who puts in the quarters.” But she set the pile aside for Grace, who came in the next morning and wondered if the shirts had already been washed, being so crisply folded. She thought about her decision to quit school, as she did most mornings before the first customers came in, and how working at the Washmat made her feel valuable in a way she never had. It was strange, but all she'd been given - tuition paid at a private college, the assurance of a good teaching job, a satisfying childhood - now seemed boring. Everyone she knew had those things. Now she could be among people who had so little money they

stole ketchup packets from the Hardee's to make tomato soup, she could cradle the secret of her background within her and be thankful she would never be like these people while pretending to be one of them. She liked working hard, getting her hands dirty and letting the world step on her toes without apology, felt it was somehow deserved. And it was easy, her selflessness, because in truth she knew she could leave the Washmat any day and make something of herself, succeed in ways they never would.

When Ernest came in that afternoon to pay for his shirts, he overheard Grace answer the pay phone. "I am not careless," she insisted. "I stand by my laundry." He liked how she'd said that, how ridiculously sincere it sounded, young and endearing. Her eyes flicked to his reflection over the dryers, and then beyond, to the people waiting outside for the bus, to the jugs of milk hooked around their fingers souring to match their expressions.

When she hung up, Ernest cleared his throat and told her his name, wondered at her ability to make him nervous.

"The loan officer," she said. "You forgot your business card in your pocket. Afraid its confetti now." She signed the receipt, adding a smiling cartoon to the paper. Noticed Ernest's receding hairline, downcast eyebrows paralleling his lips.

He slid a twenty across the counter; she raised her eyebrows. The face on the receipt appeared to be gloating at him. "You alone here? No manager at night?"

"God, you sound like my dad. Bring a can of pepper spray, he says. Bring an M16 in case anyone tries anything."

He did not realize this last bit was a joke.

"I'll walk you home later," he offered.

“Gee,” she said, but asked herself why she shouldn’t go with him. I can do whatever I want, she told the miniature father in her mind, and anyway, thought it was sweet about the twenty. “Sure, if we can get food.”

The McDonald’s was across the street from the Food Pride; Grace ran out between cars and then waited on the sidewalk for Ernest to cross at the light. Inside, three boys sat near the bathrooms smoking cigarettes, and an older woman ate chicken nuggets while she read the obituaries. “My treat,” Ernest said, and bought an extra cheeseburger after Grace went to find a booth, knowing she was probably being modest about her hunger. The soda made him burp out loud; she ate quickly and tossed her wrappers at the trash can. He did not inquire about school and this made her glad. He talked about the bank, because he didn’t want to upset her by asking after a past he was certain she didn’t want to talk about, he did not touch her or lean too close, hoping she would not believe he was taking advantage of her inexperience when he was only appreciating it. He imagined her tongue swelling to the taste of the food; she touched his hand under the table because she felt sorry for him, wondering why he winced and pulled his fingers away, why he kept averting his eyes, describing the loan process.

She went on another date with Ernest because she believed he had been lying. He said he worked in a bank, but why would someone so much older and wealthier be interested in a laundry attendant? In his leather-smelling car, when she’d nuzzled the pulse of his neck, he nudged her away, mumbling something about not wanting to hurt her. It excited her to imagine him as an actor rehearsing an invented life in order to impress her; maybe he realized all she deserved and was capable of. She saw him slinking back to an apartment he rented at a discounted rate, warm wooly sweaters

gnawed by moths, piles of books full of notes in the margins, corked bottles of wine on a window ledge. He probably felt thankful just to have her. The crisp shirts she'd washed, the nice car he drove were a friend's, or worse, stolen. He'd done reckless things to convince her he was someone else; she found the effort quite sweet. She wanted to tell him she liked him the way he was, rumpled and witty and not mysterious at all, but was afraid he would feel ashamed or intimidated, and so said nothing.

After their dinners during the next three weeks, Ernest drove Grace back to her apartment and parked at the curb. He waited outside until he saw a light come on upstairs, her silhouette passing in front of the window, obviously removing clothing, brushing hair. Tonight, the apartment remained dark long after she ascended. It would be so easy for someone to take advantage of her, he went up, worried.

Through the unlocked door, he entered the living room and saw Grace poised on a striped sofa steadying a flashlight beam on the page of her book. She had put on a pair of long socks that slouched around her ankles. She wore glasses, squinted at his shadow emerging from shadow.

"You sleep here?" He indicated the iron-frame bed in the other room, the tangle of sheets and downy duvet. The apartment was larger than he imagined. Clothes lay scattered over white carpet, hangers full of clothes tinkled in the closet. He'd only seen her in that yellow tank top and blue athletic shorts, flip flops molded to her feet.

"Don't try the switch," Grace said, but he did anyway. "I forgot the bill." His knees creaked as he lay on her mattress, testing the pillows, sniffing the duvet. He decided to loan her the money she was too afraid to ask for, the poor girl couldn't even afford electricity.

“You can stay here,” she suggested after a few moments, pleased he hadn’t reprimanded her. He didn’t respond and she realized he had already fallen asleep, facing the wall.

In the morning, he admired her chipped toenails, longing to paint them so she would feel beautiful. He had snored in his sleep, and she’d been reminded of her father, who called himself the lumberjack for his talent at sawing logs. Ernest told her about a time his father had mistakenly left him alone in the car with the windows rolled up. He felt he could tell her anything about himself, believing she had been through worse.

“He drove me to the hospital crying the whole way. That’s what scared me most, him crying like that.” He didn’t tell her how for five years after college, he’d worked at a hardware store in rebellion against taking his father’s place in the loan office, worrying he’d spend his whole life finishing a job someone else had started.

He told her about his sister, who had two children, a third huddled inside and a husband who’d abandoned all four.

“Maybe she wanted to be alone,” Grace considered, bored with his stories. “What if she chose it?” It wasn’t as if millions of babies hadn’t been born without fathers present before, history repeating through wombs and wombs. He looked at her, aghast. “But why would anyone choose to be miserable?”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” she said, aware she had hurt him. She pulled him down to the mattress and kissed him; after a minute he pushed against her shoulders, gasping a bit. She reached under his shirt, he grabbed her wrist. No, she wanted to tell him, you don’t have to worry about not being good enough, you don’t have to pretend anymore. Then she considered something terrible might have happened to him, a Jake

Barnes style accident, or maybe he was just extremely shy, never having been close to a woman before. “Poor thing,” she murmured.

Ernest knew it wasn’t right, sleeping over. She’d obviously misinterpreted his actions as desire, and it was difficult for him, because she was lovely and unsuspecting, he incessantly felt heat coming off her skin. But he knew once love got involved, there was hurt, and this was what he’d been trying to shelter her from in the first place. He rolled her over and hurried to the door, glancing back to see her clutching her ankles, blinking at him.

The niece and nephew accompanied Ernest to the Washmat that afternoon, little Ron and Frannie, and occupied themselves by circling carts in the moat of linoleum around the washers. Grace wondered whose kids he had borrowed for the day to match his story. *The Willabee Sisters* cartoon came on the television and they stopped their running to watch, mouths unhinged.

“May Willabee gets stung by a wasp in this one,” Frannie informed Grace.

“I don’t want children,” Grace whispered, weaving her arm through Ernest’s and resting her chin on his shoulder.

“We’ll pick you up after work,” he said, thinking she was joking. “A surprise trip.”

He had decided to drive her and Frannie and Ron out to the Pioneer Village at Scott County Park. He knew Grace would be grateful to get away from the city, from other people’s underwear; he had a vision of her leaning back into his chest, his hands securing the knobs of her hips against him. She wore a floral print dress and gazed over



the sprawl of uncultivated land. “Thank you for saving me Ernest,” she murmured on the movie screen of his mind, “Thank you.”

They drove in his car, air conditioner roaring. Grace took off her flip flops and put her dirty feet on the dashboard. She hadn’t showered this morning before work and could smell her armpits when she faced the window or Ernest. “I’m worried my dad’s forgotten to worry about me,” she confided more to herself than to anyone.

“Why can’t we get out?” Ron complained from the backseat. He had just gotten a camera for his ninth birthday and wanted to take pictures of barns and the cows that lay in the mud. He clicked the shutter at a blur of tree and sky; at his sister asleep with her mouth open.

They parked in a gravel lot nearly empty of cars and Frannie put on her little backpack. “I want my lunch now,” she announced, and unwrapped her peanut butter sandwich from its wax paper. “Auntie Grace, is that okay?”

“You ask your uncle.” Grace replied, feeling a tightening in her throat. “We’re not related, honey. It’s not so simple.”

Ron had run ahead of them, darting into the livery stable and the schoolhouse, photographing the dismal rooms and furniture that had been arranged to look old. Grace remembered from coming here as a child the husks of wasps in the corners of the schoolhouse windows, the musty smell of textbooks.

“They have weddings in that church,” Ernest said, squeezing her hand. The little chapel stood apart from the other buildings.

“You go ahead,” Grace said, sitting on a bench outside the dry goods store.

“Maybe we can come back next year and watch the 4<sup>th</sup> of July parade.” She almost laughed, and then realized he was serious. Next year. How long could you go on feeling sorry for someone? She’d known him two months now, and still did not know him at all. She let his hand fall. When she said stay, she hadn’t meant forever.

Horseflies mumbled around her legs and she swatted at them fiercely.

“This is boring,” Ron said. He’d used up his roll of film. She walked him up to the fake cemetery where tombstones were inscribed with funny rhymes. *Here lies the body of Jonathan Blake; Stepped on the gas instead of the brake.* Ron and Frannie crouched among the rocks, looking for dinosaur bones. Grace hated the outdoors; her father had taken her here to encourage her interest in history, though the only part of it she’d liked was the little gift shop with its pieces of fool’s gold and the Indian dreamcatchers in the windows.

“I bet no one else has ever been here,” Frannie said to her brother. “We could be zillionaires.” Wouldn’t that be nice? Grace thought sarcastically, stomping a beetle. Wouldn’t that just help our current situation? She felt like running out to the highway and flagging a car, disappearing from this part of her life. How many times do we have to leave? she wondered. How long before we can stay?

Ron climbed atop one of the stones, balancing with his arms out. “I found a caterpillar once in our yard. Looked like an eyebrow.”

Frannie joined her brother on a smaller marker. “Look, I’m standing on a body.”

“No you aren’t.” Ron nudged her with his elbow.

They made a game of it: pushing against each other until one fell. “Now me,” Ron said. “I’m a Tyrannosaurus and you’re Triceratops.”

Frannie pushed his shoulders as he leaned forward. He grabbed her, toppled her backward. She rose, giggling. “Now me. I’m rich and you’re trying to steal my jewels.” They glanced at Grace, daring her to reprimand them.

She watched for Ernest, thinking of the other morning, when she’d driven by the bank and seen his car in lot, realized, finally, why he had chosen her. Who did he think she was anyway? He was the one worth feeling sorry for. Carelessness was easy when you had a vision of what you wanted, she thought. Or better, a vision of all you didn’t.

“I want to be the pusher,” Ron insisted. Grace heard Frannie cry and turned to see the girl sprawled in the dust, mud on the knees of her tights, her brother’s hands on her wrists.

“Quit pretending!” Grace shouted, letting her gaze linger on the spires of pines and the clouds beyond. The children saw she was not interested in them, and this was enough to make them stop.

## SUNDAY MORNING

On Sunday morning, Andrea leaned toward her vanity mirror and pursed her lips. She admired the little freckles on her eyelids and the scar that followed the curve of her cheek, the subtle and lovely puckering the result of her collision with the cake table at her fifth birthday party - nearly ten years ago now. She put on a yellow tank top, a pair of denim shorts her mom disapproved of for their tattered hems and her black flip-flops; she wanted to enjoy the sunlight while she still could.

Her mom had decided, since it was early June, and since Andrea had been complaining for years about being “forced” to attend Sunday church services, that she would get a job at the Food Pride. Andrea had taken in her application last Tuesday, and that afternoon received a phone call requesting an interview. A man in a pale green shirt and a black bow tie led her through a long cement hallway to a table piled with *Independent Grocer* newsletters and stained with spaghetti sauce. On the wall hung a bulletin board full of Polaroid photographs of Food Pride employees gritting their teeth and reluctantly holding up various junk food items under the headline *My Favorite Snack*. The man examined Andrea’s application over the rims of his glasses, every so often raising his eyebrows at her, as if trying to catch her behaving in a way that contradicted her credentials. She plucked at the pleats in her khakis. After a few moments, he removed his glasses – taking time to tuck them into the velvet-lined pouch he kept in his shirt pocket – and asked her what her biggest disappointment in life had been.

“Disappointment,” she said. “How do you mean?”

He sat back and laced his fingers behind his head. “Oh, just anything that made you sad or maybe that made you want to improve yourself or see yourself in a new way.”

“I had a gerbil once,” she said. “I wanted it to live in my pocket like Runaway Ralph, but it jumped out and hit its head on the kitchen floor and died.”

“I see,” he said.

In the end, she didn’t think her straight A’s and her having completed confirmation classes at Redeemer Lutheran Church had anything to do with her getting hired immediately after her interview; she’d noticed all the other baggers were girls her age, and pretty.

On Wednesday morning, the man in the bow tie presented her with a navy blue smock with a smiling lion embroidered over the left pocket. The fabric drooped over her chest and hung around her thighs; she’d have to wear a padded bra if she wanted any attention from the check stand boys.

She sat in the same windowless break room and watched a safety video narrated by a cartoon shopping cart named Speedy. “Wa-wa-watch out!” Speedy shouted, careening through an unmarked puddle in the produce aisle. The man in the bow tie chuckled. Later, he timed Andrea on his wristwatch as she arranged cereal boxes in a paper bag. He pretended to be a grumpy old lady demanding Andrea to steer his cart full of bags out to the parking lot. He demonstrated to her how to replace the trash bag in the break room, how to clean the toilet in the employee bathroom. He walked her through the stockroom, where boxes of canned goods were stacked on wooden pallets.

“And every shift you’ll make sure the Big Roll toilet paper is stocked out on the floor,” he said. “Sunday afternoon? Four o’clock? Think you’re up to the challenge?”

*That's it?* She wanted to ask. She felt uneasy, as if someone had snatched the warm carpet of summer out from under her and rolled it up on a high shelf. She realized she should've kept her mouth shut and continued to endure the few weekend hours sardined in a hard-backed pew between her sisters and parents. Even today – which she had ominously come to refer to as her “last” Sunday – she wished she had gone to church, where her thoughts would not keep returning to the ugly blue smock slumped over her closet doorknob.

She pocketed six dollars from between the pages of her sister's diary, locked the front door with the key hidden inside the plastic rock and started down the sidewalk. From up on the hill she had a clear view of the Mississippi River dividing the landscape, flowing east to west as it did in no other place in America. Cars crossed the Government Bridge toward the Iowa border; a barge nested on the shore opposite the riverboat casino. She hadn't realized until she started her freshman year at Rock Island High School, when Hispanic kids from the south side middle schools joined the ranks of students, that she would be considered snobby, simply because she was white and because her family lived on the hillside. Arguing that her dad knew all the words to “El Condor Pasa” did nothing to improve her cause.

She passed along a wide hedge up the walk to her friend Kelsey's house, where she rang the bell, hoping they could walk to Lincoln Park and lay on the slides, or maybe coerce Kelsey's mother into driving them to the mall. Last time, they'd gotten phone numbers from two boys from Iowa, and that night, uncomfortably huddled atop the shoes in Kelsey's closet, they had called the cutest one and informed him, between giggles, that they wanted to pour hot fudge on his dick and suck it off. It was something Kelsey had

read about in *Cosmo*. “Oh farmer boy, just thinking of chocolate makes me come,” she had whispered later, nudging Andrea under the covers, and that had sent them into a whole new fit of laughter.

After no one answered the door, Andrea decided to keep walking down to the Import Market to sample the makeup and the Mexican sodas flavored mango and tamarind. She braced her knees against the upward thrust of the pavement, feeling the strength in her legs. She had walked for twenty minutes or so and was nearing the bottom of the hill, when she passed a city bus idling at the curb. The doors were open, but no one sat inside. A large curly-haired woman in a white shirt crouched against the front headline, smoking a cigarette. When she saw Andrea, she raised her hands like a bandit in a cowboy movie, gripping her green plastic lighter between her thumb and forefinger of one hand and her cigarette packet between the other.

“You caught me,” she said.

“Oh,” Andrea said. “I don’t need a ride.”

“Sunday morning shifts ‘bout bore the spit outta you. Up and down this damn hill so many times I drive it in my sleep. Some mornings I just sit up in the parking lot of the YMCA and watch the old folks treading water with their empty milk jugs. Not once have I got a complaint.”

“People probably just like to walk places when it’s nice out,” Andrea said.

“Once I drove all the way till my gas tank went near empty and I filled up in Amana. That’s where the Amish folks churn their butter. Back to the garage an hour later and still no complaints.”

“I’ve never ridden a bus before,” Andrea said. “My mom drives me to school.”

“You practically beg to get fired and they give you the Driver of the Week award to tape to your fridge. That and a coupon for a cone from the Dairy Queen,” the woman said. “Say, I’ll take you downtown. I’ve got all the lights timed so if you hit ‘em going 45, they’re green all the way.”

“I’m just going shopping,” Andrea said.

“It’s the Lord’s day, honey,” the woman said. “Most places are sure to be closed. We can just drive a while. I’ll drop you off right back here.”

“I guess,” Andrea said. She didn’t know where else to go. She followed the driver up the rubber-coated steps and took a seat near the middle. As the bus started moving, she felt a surge of something pass through her chest, and shivered. Through the smudged glass, she watched buildings shoot upward and away at an angle, buildings she had never been inside: the Red Wing Boot Store, the Highlander Laundromat, the fire station with its red engines gleaming in the driveway. Two Hispanic women pushing strollers full of soda cans passed a row of used cars behind a cyclone fence. As they sped through green lights, the bus began to bounce on its axles. Andrea gripped the seat back in front of her. The river gleamed ahead of them; she began to panic, fearing the driver meant to plunge them right into the waves. Or that she would speed across the bridge into Iowa, past the Interstate toward that little Amish town. Andrea imagined herself poised over a butter churn, a white bonnet concealing her hair; the gloomy silence of Sundays.

She stood and stumbled across the aisle. Over the mirror a little rubber chicken bobbed from a suction cup. Andrea gripped the driver’s shoulder and shook it. “Stop,” she shouted. There was a rushing sound as the bus lurched forward, throwing Andrea against the door handle, and then settled on its brakes.



“And not a red light in the bunch,” the driver said, laughing. She looked at Andrea, pouted her lips and narrowed her eyes. “What? I suppose you want to head back already. Too good for my kind of fun.” She floored the gas pedal, sending plumes of purple smoke up behind them.

Andrea peered through the front windshield at the flapping green awning of the nearest building. The words *Masonic Village Senior Apartments & Assisted Living* were lettered in white cursive along the fabric.

“Not too good, I just forgot,” she said. “My grandpa’s birthday. I should at least go in and say hello.”

Her legs trembled as she descended the steps. A cold breeze from the river summoned goose bumps on her arms. On the sidewalk, she squinted back at the streetlight, which had just changed yellow, and at the blur of the tree-speckled hillside. She could not see her house, or the curve of her street, or anything that looked familiar. She wished the driver would circle back up the hill, but the woman watched her from inside the idling bus, an amused smile on her face, the back of her hair illuminated.

“Gotta wait,” the driver called down. She tapped her pack of cigarettes against the steering wheel, steadily flipping it over and over. “Way ahead a schedule now. I could drive you down 11<sup>th</sup> if its more your style, put all the windows down and listen to the Baptists singing their hymns.”

“He’s ninety-three. I really should,” Andrea said, backing away. She considered cutting behind the building and up a side street, but worried she would get lost, or that a homeless person would try to rob her, or that the driver would stalk her back up the hill. She decided the easiest choice was to enter the building, maybe find a rear exit or else

wait in the lobby until the driver pulled away from the curb. She ducked into the shadow of the awning and through the heavy wooden door. A vivid black and red Oriental carpet covered the floor and dark furniture faced a fireplace with its gold chain curtains drawn. She smelled cinnamon, and heard, from somewhere nearby, the chime of an elevator bell. Narrow sunlit corridors lead from the main room and she immediately moved toward the one on her right.

Numbered doors on either side of the hallway were propped open with chairs or rubber stoppers. The cream-colored walls were bare. Television laughter merged with snores and the metallic tinkling of silverware. It was lunchtime; Andrea imagined her stomach retreating toward her spine in the slow-moving manner of shrinking rooms in action movies.

She hurried toward the window at the end of the corridor, a tall, curtainless piece of glass above a humming air conditioner. Only after she passed the last doorway did she start, noticing a pair of tasseled loafers leading up the legs of faded black jeans to the tattered spine of *Six Minute Mysteries*. The book rested on the knee of a dark-haired man sitting on a stool between the fire extinguisher and the window. Andrea hadn't been startled by *him* – he appeared harmless enough with his long limbs folded into that ridiculously tiny corner - but by the fact that he had observed her in a moment when she believed she was alone, huffing through her parted lips.

“It locks,” he said. “You can’t get back in.” He nodded at the Fire Exit door behind her.

“I’m leaving for good,” she said.

He shrugged at her sun-bright reflection in the glass, a face in the clouds. “Alright then. If you knock I’ll pretend not to hear.”

“Is that a threat or a promise?” she said boldly, and laughed. She felt giddy, catching a whiff of the warm outside air, baked bricks to press her palms against. A pleasant tingle passed over her scalp, and she realized the day was not lost. She still had hours until she had to be at the Food Pride, hours to herself.

She proceeded through the door and down the wheelchair ramp through to the cement passageway, hearing the lock click into place behind her. A red EXIT sign buzzed at the end of the passage; *Fire Exit*, a smaller sign on the door warned, *alarm will sound*. She considered pushing through anyway and running free, imagined herself soaring up the hill, or maybe to the edge of the river, submerging her toes in the murky water. But her hesitance drew her back into the passageway, up the wheelchair incline scuffed with black skid marks and to the stairwell. She took the stairs two at a time, stretching her legs to reach for three, as if some invisible force was nipping at her heels, chiding her on. At the door of the first landing, marked with a cartoonish red 2, she yanked on the knob, already aware, already dreading what she knew would be true. *Doors to remain locked on weekends for security reasons*, a paper sign taped to the perpendicular wall read, *Thks! The Mngment*.

She did not bother to try the upstairs floors, but ran back down, and she threw herself, palms first, against the door. “Hey, man with the book,” she shouted. Her voice sounded strange, like water pushing through a clogged pipe. Within moments, a wide angle of light spread up the wall, revealing cracks in the cement, and the tall man – much taller than she had imagined – eased the door back so she could maneuver around it. He

gripped her elbow, pushing a finger into the soft tendon between her bones. “Didn’t I tell you? No way out,” he said. “Now you can meet her. I saved your life, and so you’ll meet her.” He spoke quickly, conspiratorially, almost panting as they tumbled into the bright corridor.

“What?” she asked. “Who?”

“He’ll be right about through the sermon by now.”

She yanked her arm free of his clutch, standing between him and the window. The spicy smell of goulash rushed at her from down the hall; for a moment, she had forgotten they weren’t alone here, that old people were nestled just inside each of these rooms watching western movies on the television, taking naps, slowly, slowly dying. She could call out if she had to.

“What are you talking about, ‘saved my life’?”

“She loved her,” he insisted. “More than she loves me.” He let his dark gaze settle on hers. She didn’t look away - couldn’t - as if again it was her own face whose features so desperately sought her approval. Her eyes darted over his caterpillar eyebrows and thin, crooked nose and colorless lips, the shadow of a beard under his pale skin. There were creases beside his eyes, a thickness about his dimpled chin. He wore a short-sleeved plaid shirt. Twin ovals were imprinted on either side of his nose, reading glasses tucked inside his shirt pocket.

“I don’t owe you anything,” she said. She swallowed the bubble of a laugh. She cocked her hip in a practiced way and poked her fingertips inside her waistband, feeling the downy hairs of her stomach.

“You’re name’s Brenda,” he said. “Got it? Brenda. You and me had some trouble for awhile, but we smoothed things out. You tell her that. Tell her it was your fault. She’s been waiting to hear it for eight years now. Me saying it isn’t good enough.”

“You are one crazy dope,” she said. She laughed. “But whatever. I’m in Drama Club. Here?” She indicated the doorway. “And what’s your play name going to be?”

“This isn’t a joke,” he said.

Andrea smiled and waved him toward her. “Oh Grand-ma, ma,” she called into the room. “It’s Little Red Riding Hood and the lumberjack come to see you.”

He pulled her by the wrist away from the door and flung her into the sharp edge of the air conditioner. Immediately, he was upon her, pinning her with a knee in her thigh and his palms forcing back her shoulders. Her skull knocked against the window. She was too shocked to cry out.

“You think the world revolves around you? Playing your little games with people? Think you’re some hot little thing and probably don’t even know where your own pussy is. This is serious,” he said. “I should’ve left you in there. Now you tell her just what I told you to say and pretend like you’re smiling and happy and maybe she’ll forget all that shit that happened before.” He braced his arm against her back, smothered her mouth with his palm so her breaths emerged in short, flatulent spurts. She tried to bite him; her tongue grazed the salty lines of his palm, the hard little disc of a callus. His breath was hot against the pulse of her neck. His fingertips dug into the mush between her ribs, as if trying to claw his way to her heart.

“I’m not one for violence,” he said. “I don’t believe in that shit. Comes back to get you. That scar on your face.” He touched it; she winced and began to blink rapidly.

“You think of me next time you go around batting your eyes at some Joe on the street. How easy I could’ve fucked you. You’re nothing special.” He pushed her – almost gently - ahead of him down the hall, and into the apartment. The possible truth of the things he had said – those simple proclamations, condemnations - burned at the core of her, as if he had indeed peeled back her protective tissue and seen the fears in her heart, confirmed them.

“You don’t know me,” she said.

Through the dimness she saw the wallpaper was a pattern of ducks wearing blue ribbons around their necks, their open beaks revealing yellow triangles of landscape behind them. Ceramic dishes were piled on a plastic rack; a step stool stood before the kitchen sink.

Closing the door behind them, he urged her down a carpeted hallway and left through a doorway into a gloomy bedroom where the shades were drawn against the day. An old woman was propped up in a bed on wheels, three pillows scrunched between her spine and the wall, a nubby yellow blanket over her legs. Open cardboard boxes lined the perimeter of the room; ceramic figurines on a shelf opposite the bed gazed through dust-veiled eyes. A television blared from the corner of the room. A priest in a gold-threaded robe stood before his congregation, leading them in verses of “I Walk in His Footsteps.”

“Look who came to see you Ma,” the man said. “Your favorite daughter-in-law.” He cupped his hand above Andrea’s hipbone, steered her toward the bed.

“My stars! Is that?” the woman asked. She squinted fiercely in Andrea’s direction. Her eyes were milky blue, rimmed with white lashes. She patted her hair. “And look at me! Allen didn’t tell me you were coming! I said to Allen, just yesterday it was, I said,

‘Brenda will at least visit me. Even if she doesn’t love you anymore, she won’t forget about me.’”

“That was last week you said it. To Doctor Keith, remember?”

The old woman waved his comment away. Her jaw trembled a bit. “Oh, I know. Don’t you tease me.” She laughed nervously and squinted again at Andrea. Andrea wondered what she really saw; shadows, probably, the precise boundaries of shadows and light.

“That colored girl gave us some nice flowers, didn’t she, Mindy?” the woman said. “Pinned those carnations right on our dresses and said, ‘A donation for happiness.’ You were so scared Mother would find out. She wouldn’t have allowed it, our prancing about Market Street on the evening of the Sabbath.”

“This is Brenda here, Mom. She wanted to tell you she’s sorry for not visiting sooner.”

“Oh, Brenda. How you put up with him,” the woman said. “So chunky, Allen was as a boy. I thought, ‘who’s going to marry this tub?’ Couldn’t even run the mile for gym class in the seventh grade. I had to forge a doctor’s note. You’re nothing but skin and bones these days, my.” She picked at the blanket nubs, twisting the round bits of thread until they unfurled and sprung back. “When you all got married, I said, ‘It’s a good thing Brenda goes in for a sense of humor – that’s what matters most in the end.’ Steve Martin knew it, didn’t he? He knew what it took for that pretty blond to see past his big old nose. ‘I love your nose, Charlie,’ she said. ‘I love you, Charlie.’ Why, ten love letters a day would make anyone look past a schnoz like that! Ugliness goes out the window with that kind of devotion. And here the man couldn’t even drink without a straw.”

“It was just a movie,” Allen said. “It was a fake nose.”

“I always wanted to be a blond,” the woman said. She held her hand over her eyebrows as if against a glare of sunlight. “Have you gone gray yet, Mindy? I can’t remember.”

“I dye it,” Andrea said. She felt like crying, having glimpsed in some future bed the confused and shriveled figures of her mother, her sisters, herself.

The old woman struck the mattress with her palm. “Henry, the poor girl’s probably starving.” And then to Andrea: “Always lazy, that one was.” Andrea felt Allen’s fingers tighten on her waist, as if he was trying to steady himself against her. He pushed off of her hip and disappeared down the hallway. Andrea considered following him, slipping past him out the front door when he entered the kitchen; it was probably nearing one or two o’clock and she had to be at the Food Pride at four.

“Where are you going?” the old woman asked loudly. She held out her hand toward Andrea. “Come sit.”

Andrea moved to the edge of the bed frame and lowered herself onto the mattress. The woman’s spindly knee nudged her tailbone.

“Now, tell me. Did he hit you, honey?” the woman said in a whisper. “Is that why you left? Because I never met a happy woman who run off so quick as you did.” She huffed reached to secure the lace collar of her nightgown under her chin.

Andrea looked at the shelf on the far wall where a series of angel figurines covered their naked parts with their wings. She eyed the crooked crucifix over the bed, whose feet pointed toward the window.



The woman's hands suddenly flew up to her neck, and under the blankets she dug her heels across the width of the mattress. She gripped Andrea's soft upper arm, and then shoved it away. "What do you want?" she shrieked. "My jewelry's under the bed, in the cigar box. There's not much. Take it and get out, you little weasel. You wench. You think I'm rich because I'm old."

"I don't," began Andrea. She stood, awkwardly arching away from the sharp fists that pummeled her spine. "I don't want to go to work." Tears leaked over the folds of her scar. She wiped furiously at her cheeks with the backs of her wrists.

Allen had emerged with a fiberglass tray between his hands; he shuffled carefully forward, concentrating on the sloshing liquid in three jelly jars. On a plate he'd arranged a pile of cheddar crackers spread with peanut butter.

"Jesus," he said. He set the tray on the closed lid of the record player. "What did you say to her?" he said. Andrea couldn't tell if he was asking her or his mother.

"I'm sorry. Sorry," Andrea said. She hiccupped and accepted the cool mug from his hands. She drank; it was ginger ale.

"Allen doesn't visit me but once a week," the woman said. "Wants to lock me up in a nursing home. 'Pack up everything you got, Ma,' he says to me. 'Can never be too prepared.' Prepared for what? I ask him. But we both know, we both know he's just ticking off the days till I'm dead."

"I'm here every morning before work," he said. He broke a cracker sandwich in half, cupping one hand under the other to catch the falling crumbs. "Every goddamn day."

His mother opened her mouth to accept the food; she spoke while churning the orange mush over her tongue. “Who’s this?” she asked. She waved her hand in Andrea’s direction. “That cleaning lady? I told you I don’t want her thieving hands anywhere near my good stockings.”

“God, I give up,” Allen said. He smoothed a knuckle over his eyebrow. “Why do I bother? She wouldn’t know the difference if I never showed up again, still thinks she’s a kid, skipping around town with her dead sister. I thought with you here she’d get off my case. She loved Brenda. Used to bake a chocolate pie if I even mentioned her name, hoping she was coming for a visit. She can’t get past the fact that people leave, and die. She still thinks my dad’s out at church. Everyday, she says, ‘Get the lunch ready for your father. Ask Mindy if she got the tickets.’ Thinks they’re going to a movie. All I want is one Sunday to myself. I get so I’m in the truck with my boots on and my tackle box full of night crawlers when this feeling tugs at me like maybe something terrible has happened and I have to drive here and see that she’s still alive and yammering on about the same old shit.”

“Hush and get me my cigar box, honey, under the bed there,” the woman said to Andrea. She had pushed herself up on her elbows. “I’m feeling very feminine right now and need a little assistance.”

“I have to get home,” Andrea said.

“With Allen? You all still in that crummy shack up on 5<sup>th</sup>?”

“But I need to look pretty for the dance,” his mother pouted. She leaned over the edge of her bed, exposing a bluish strip of her spine, and re-surfaced, her face flushed and

the cigar box between her hands. She shook it once, and the contents rattled against the lid.

“You’ll just get that junk all over the sheets, Mom.”

“Al usually does it for me, don’t you, honey? Doctor Keith likes me with a little blush. That’s what he says, that devil.” She shook the box at Andrea.

“Just let me do it,” Allen said. He stepped forward and took the box from his mother’s hands. He sat on the edge of the bed and opened the lid, removing compacts and tubes of lipstick, arranging them on the blanket over her stomach. “Hold still.”

Her eyelids were pursed together like little mouths waiting to be kissed. Allen dipped a little sponge into a pot of blue and dabbed it under her eyebrows. He brushed powder over the flabby cheeks, the porous nose. On the television, the priest raised the communion chalice. Allen unscrewed a tube of mascara and curled the brush over his mother’s fluttering lashes. Then he turned his head toward Andrea and indicated the doorway with his chin, discarding her. She backed away and ran down the little hallway and through the corridor that led back to the world, holding in her mind the image of the skinny back of his neck, the knobs of backbone straining against skin.

She hurried out to the sidewalk and squinted back at the contrast of sun highlighting the muddy waves of the river, at the brick dam, churning foam. Behind the dam was an island where military men lived when they weren’t fighting wars; Andrea’s dad had taken her there once to see the pyramids of cannonballs and the stately brick houses and the rows and rows of white tombstones poking through the lawns like teeth. She shuddered as the heat smoothed away her goose bumps, and tenderly pressed her fingertips against her ribs.

She began walking quickly toward the hill. The insoles of her sandals stuck to her sweaty heels. Trash lined the outer wall of a building with a ballerina slipper painted on the door, below the street lamps lay little constellations of glass. *Pawn It, Hear* demanded a hand painted sign over a barred window. She smelled yeast from the bread factory. Beside the Spanish Foods Market, a woman sat on a stool peeling an orange with the blade of an open scissors. She fed small triangles of the fruit to a German Shepard, who took the pieces daintily between his teeth before lowering his head and swallowing, dribbling juice onto the pavement.

“Give me some ass!” a boy called to Andrea from the open window of a passing car. His friend leaned out over the hood on the passenger side and wiggled his tongue between the V of his fingers.

“You wish,” she shouted. Watching the diminishing reflection of the driver’s face in the side mirror, air rushed up from her lungs and she began to laugh; she couldn’t help it.

She ran the rest of the way home. Sweat bloomed in her underwear, between her breasts, under the weight of her hair. When she reached her front lawn, where the sprinkler was tossing glimmering pearls of water onto her sisters in their swim suits, her pulse was pounding in her ears.

“Come in with us,” her youngest sister called. The other bent close to the hose and filled her mouth. She ran at Andrea, spurting water.

“Quit it, twerp,” Andrea said. She kicked off her sandals on the doormat and padded inside across the cool tiles and opened the freezer door, allowing steam to rush at her face. She rummaged through the ice box and found an old coconut Popsicle (a flavor

no one in her family liked) and held the icy wrapper against the back of her neck, under her hair.

“Where in the world?” her dad said. His linen church jacket lay over the back of the sofa; he sat at the kitchen table, writing checks for the bills. The window screens gleamed. “Your mother spent the afternoon ironing your work clothes for you, and you better not be late because you were dilly-dallying around. Get a move on. She wants a picture of you before you leave.”

Up the stairs Andrea flew and into her bedroom to tear back the sheets her mom had tucked in. She flopped back on the mattress and grabbed her ankles, her knees against her collarbone, and smelled the faint raspberry scent of her shaving cream. She rocked back and forth, letting the weight of legs guide her body.

Beneath her window, her sisters squealed, and she thought of their bodies, slick as otters, darting in and out of the spray. She squinted at the dark shape of her Food Pride smock draped across the back of her desk chair, at the white pleated khakis doubled over a hanger. *Just a while longer*, she thought. Straightening her legs over the baseboard, she sat up to massage the soft muscles behind her knee and glimpsed, across the room, the soles of her feet reflected in her vanity, stained black.